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Author: Graf von Wolf Ernst Hugo Emil Baudissin

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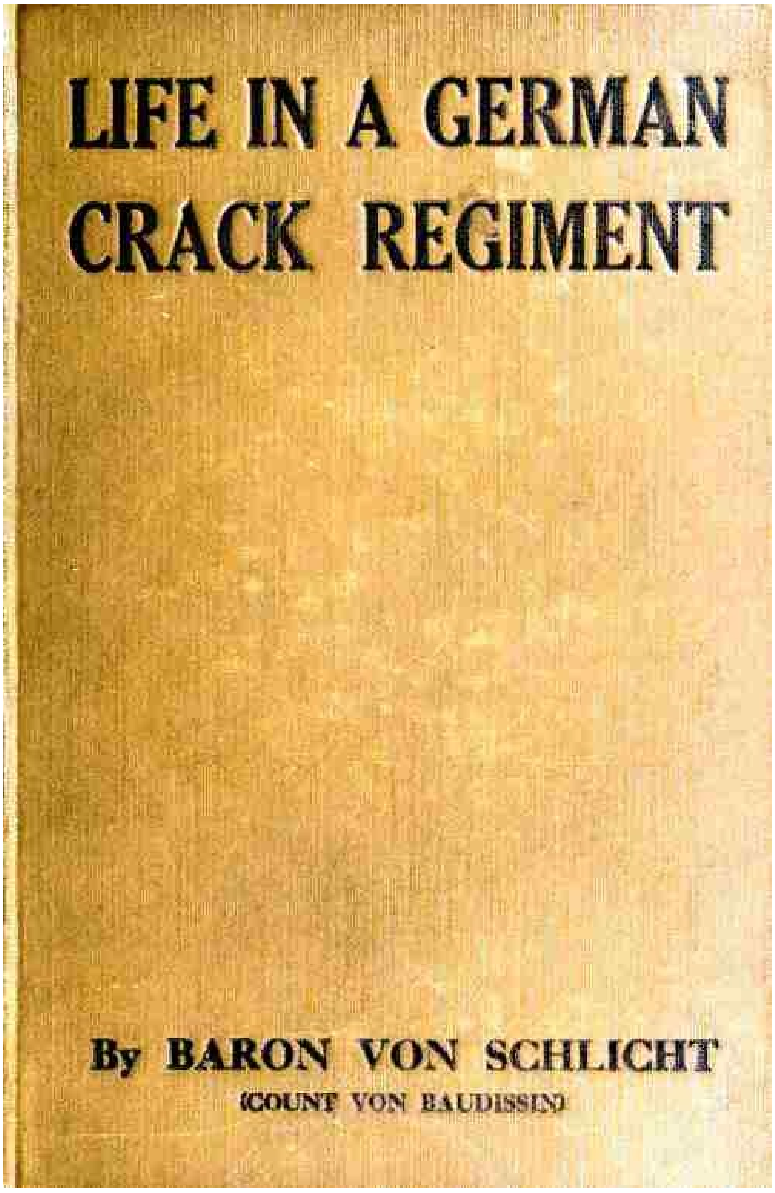

LIFE IN A GERMAN CRACK REGIMENT

LIFE IN A GERMAN CRACK REGIMENT

BY

BARON VON SCHLICHT

(COUNT VON BAUDISSIN)

NEW YORK

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PREFACE

Lieutenant Bilse, Beyerlein, and Baron von Schlicht,[A] the author of the present work, with their many less-known followers, have managed among them to create what may be regarded as a novel of a new species—the "critical" military novel. What is commonly called the "military novel," has, of course, long been known in Germany, but it differed considerably from the new species. The older military novel gave more or less lively pictures of camp, garrison and casino life, and the gay young lieutenant who generally figured as hero was much adored by ladies (as indeed he still is). But between the lieutenant of romance and the lieutenant of stern reality there is a gulf. Readers have now before them the lieutenant of reality, and the uplifting of the veil on his interesting, if not very edifying, personality and doings, has aroused in Germany a curious storm of indignation, especially in army and official circles. [Pg vi] Indeed, as may be remembered, Baron von Schlicht was "insulted" over the present work in the Reichstag itself, and the affair went so far that a duel nearly followed. The widespread interest taken in these revelations of military life is testified by the number of copies of the present work (40,000) which have been sold in Germany, though its circulation is now forbidden there; while for his outspokenness in this novel it is rumoured that Baron von Schlicht has to meet his trial in Berlin very shortly.

[A] This is a pen-name. The author's actual name is Count von Baudissin.

Though widely known as the author of various military sketches and stories of a more or less light and humorous turn, in the present case Baron von Schlicht shows little trace of his characteristic vein. Here, rather, he devotes himself seriously to making what is in effect a detailed and apparently dispassionate *exposé* in regard to the manners and morals of officers of the old nobility in the German army. The indignation aroused against him is all the greater as he himself belongs to the old nobility which he so freely criticises, and he has the further advantage of speaking from inside knowledge of the officers' caste (Offiziers-Kaste) to which he himself belonged during his military career. Lieutenant Bilse wrote from outside this circle of the old nobility; thus Baron von Schlicht's work fills a gap which Lieutenant Bilse's book still left open.

R. M.

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CHAPTER I

By Command of the Emperor

The "Yellow Butterflies," as Franz Ferdinand Leopold's infantry regiment was called on account of its yellow epaulettes, was celebrating its anniversary; the day when, more than forty years ago, it lost in a famous battle a third of its rank and file and more than half of its officers. The memory of the heroic deeds of the regiment could not be allowed to perish; the younger generation were continually reminded of them, and thus the celebration of the anniversary of the famous battle was accompanied by the toast: "In remembrance of the fallen; for the encouragement of the living." The fallen, for what they had done, were given every year a magnificent wreath tied with [Pg 10] a gigantic ribbon of the regimental colours; the living, who had as yet done nothing, were given a splendid dinner with equally splendid wine: and when the enthusiasm aroused by the official speech of the colonel, under the influence of the champagne, had done its work, the officers all declared again and again that when the regiment went into battle they would know how to die as bravely as their comrades—and they really meant what they swore.

To-day the anniversary was being celebrated with especial magnificence, for new officers' quarters were to be opened, which were to be used exclusively as a mess-room. Only at mid-day, as he was preparing his oration, did it occur to the colonel that the dedication of this building, which was intended for purely pleasurable purposes, was not altogether in harmony with the solemn anniversary of the dead. He could not very well say, "In order to honour the noble dead we open to-day our new mess-room, which, I hope, will be a financial success." Certainly that would not do. Then a way out of the difficulty occurred to the colonel; he would simply say, "And we vow to the fallen heroes, that within these walls we will above all practise the spirit of comradeship, and the soldierly virtues, which animated them and fitted them to perform their heroic deeds." That would make a suitable impression; and so [Pg 11] in a pleasant frame of mind he betook himself to the mess-room where there was much excitement and bustle. In the morning the usual formalities had been followed; almost all the former officers of the regiment had appeared, the closely allied regiments had sent deputations, and nobody had come with empty hands. A veritable shower of silver ornaments had been poured upon the "Golden Butterflies," and now all were thronging into the reception-rooms, greeting mutual friends, admiring the presents, and awaiting the arrival of the important officials.

Dinner was to take place at seven o'clock, and on the stroke of the hour the representative of His Majesty appeared. Originally the Emperor had promised the regiment the honour of his presence, but at the last moment he had been prevented from attending.

The music began, and in a long procession the company went into the dining hall. A cry of admiration broke from the lips of everyone at the sight of the magnificent apartment with its gorgeous decorations and beautifully laid table.

The officers of the "Golden Butterflies" who led in the guests swaggered a bit, and drew themselves up as much as to say, "Yes, this is what we're like, that's how we do things. We have been quite long enough housed in a fashion unbecoming to our rank. [Pg 12] But now, where is the regiment that can boast of such apartments?" They knew that on account of their old mess-room, in which, according to the declaration of a cavalry officer of the Guards, no self-respecting man could feel really happy, they had often been slighted. Formerly they had been the worst off in this respect; now they were the best. The "Golden Butterflies" beamed; each word of compliment and admiration which the guests expressed sounded like heavenly music in the ears of the officers, and each seemed as proud as if it were due to him that at last they had a new mess-room. And in truth, each had done his share, for if all of them did not appreciate so highly the calling and honour of an officer as in bygone days, yet the officers and friends of the regiment in earlier times could never had raised such a large sum as was required for the erection and furnishing of this building. As the bearers of old and honoured names, each of the officers was conscious of his position and his duty, for the "Golden Butterflies" were proud to be considered one of the haughtiest and most exclusive of regiments in the whole army.

With pride they regarded their guests, all of whom bore important names. A lieutenant of the Uhlans, Baron Gersbach, whom all knew as a great gambler, stuck his eyeglass in his eye, examined the persons at the table, and then turned to his

[Pg 13] neighbour; "Really a highly select company; not a single man belonging to the middle class is present."

"Yes, but there is—one——"

The Uhlan stuck his eyeglass more firmly in to his eye to discover which it was.

"Who is it?" he asked at last.

"The architect who built the place."

"Ah, well, he hardly counts. But why did you invite him to dinner?"

"We thought about the matter for a very long time, but we came to the conclusion we could not do otherwise. The fellow formerly served in this regiment for a year, and out of attachment and love for the regiment he drew up the plans free of cost, and he has also charged nothing for all the trouble he has taken. Well, we had to show ourselves equally obliging."

The Uhlan nodded approvingly. "Yes, I quite understand, and such an invitation is not only the easiest, but the most magnificent form of thanks. To the end of his days the fellow will live on the remembrance of this evening, and besides that it is a splendid recommendation for him to have dined with us. I must say, considering his class, he seems a very decent sort of fellow; fancy, his hands are manicured! What's his name?"

"I think it's Klipper, Lipper, Wipper, or something of that sort."

[Pg 14] "Oh, well, it doesn't matter. By the way, have you heard," went on the Uhlan, "what is said to have happened in a line regiment at a festival dinner? A fellow—I don't like to use the word comrade in such a connection—well, as I was saying, a fellow made a fool of himself, and in his drunkenness—for I must call his condition by that name—he gave an ensign a sounding box on the ears at the dinner-table because the latter, in his opinion, did not jump up quickly enough when the besotted beast pledged his health."

"It's incredible!"

"Nevertheless it is true."

"Do you know what will happen next?"

Baron Gersbach shrugged his shoulders. "What can happen? They cannot fight a duel, for it is impossible for an ensign to challenge his superior."

"Yes, that is so," agreed the other.

"There are only two possible ways of settling the thing: either the lieutenant, if he should ever become sober again, must beg the ensign's pardon in the presence of the officers and all those who witnessed the affair, or the lieutenant must flee, and then the ensign must settle with himself whether he will go on living with the blow on his cheek unavenged. But in any case his career is all over—at any rate in our regiment. An ensign who had suffered such a box on the ears would not be made an officer."

[Pg 15] Both were silent for a moment, then the signal was given to fill the glasses. The two officers drank each other's health, and the Uhlan continued: "One can't help feeling very sorry for the unfortunate ensign; he is said to have been entirely blameless in the whole affair, and to attack an ensign is really far worse than to insult one's equal. But these things happen to-day because they are not more careful in the choice of men who are going to be officers. To-day, anybody who has the necessary cash, and belongs to a family that has not come into conflict with the police, can become a lieutenant."

The other acquiesced. "Alas, it is such a pity that the necessity of increasing our army forces us to choose officers from the middle class."

The Uhlan emptied his glass again, and then said: "You are quite right, although it cannot be denied that some of the middle class are very decent. I must own that I became acquainted with a couple of fellows—in our regiment of course they would have been quite impossible—but I met them several times in the train——"

The officer of the "Golden Butterflies" looked up with astonishment. "Do you mean to say that you travel second class?"

"Who, I?" At first the Uhlan was quite disconcerted, then he laughed loud and
[Pg 16] long: "What a joke! Do you suppose I travel second class? Perhaps you'll give me a free pass? Or do you think I act as an agent, perhaps? If I were to write this to my dear papa he would be highly amused."

It was long before the Uhlan had recovered his composure, then he said: "When I said just now I had got to know these fellows in the train, I was speaking figuratively. I meant a mere passing acquaintanceship, and as I told you these people were really quite nice, it was very amusing to me to talk with a fellow from the provinces who lives in such different circumstances. I was highly amused when they told me how they spent their month's salary of fifty or sixty marks. Just think, why, my hairdresser gets that!" Then quite suddenly he broke off and said: "By the way, we were disputing yesterday at mess as to how long it really was since the last officer belonging to the middle class had his discharge from your regiment."

"On 15th May it will be four years."

The Uhlan looked up astonished. "Just fancy, you remember the exact date!"

"Well, one does not easily forget such a joyful date."

"You are quite right, but haven't you got a *bourgeois* fellow among the ensigns?"

[Pg 17] "Not a single one. The colonel has laid it down that under no circumstances whatever will he receive such a man."

"Very sensible of him. First of all, such a fellow would not suit here at all; secondly, he would be a great source of annoyance to you; thirdly, he himself would feel highly uncomfortable. The proper thing is for people to remain in their own class. And the common people who will not understand that talk about 'Caste' feeling and the 'Aristocratic Spirit'!—well, let them talk, what does it matter to us?"

After a slight pause the officer of the "Golden Butterflies" said: "Do you know I have been thinking a good deal lately about that 'Caste' feeling and aristocratic prejudice. Whenever the Guards give a dinner the glasses are raised to symbolise that the spirit which inspires the officers must remain ever the same. Now I think this means that not only must we ever cherish love and fidelity for the ruling house, but also that we must ever remain 'first-class men,' with the same ideas as we hold now. As bearers of noble names, and belonging to the most important regiment, we must ever be conscious of our exclusive position, and so stand firmly together, and we must maintain strictly the barrier that divides us from the middle class. Let us [Pg 18] drink once more to this hope; that the Guards may ever remain what we now are—bearers of the oldest names, 'first-class' men!"

The conversation of his neighbour had been far too long for the Uhlan, who had scarcely listened to what he was saying; nevertheless he re-echoed his words, "Let us drink." But just as he was about to raise his glass a universal shout arose; the colonel had risen and given the first cheer for the head of the army, and the second to the representative of His Majesty, who was there present.

After a short pause the latter rose to thank them for the honour they had done him, then he continued: "His Majesty has commanded me to express his extreme regret that he cannot be present to-day at the anniversary festival of the regiment; His Majesty has been pleased to command me to offer to the regiment that has always distinguished itself in war and peace his royal greeting, and to assure the regiment of his imperial favour and his imperial good wishes. His Majesty is quite sure that in the future, as in the past, he may always depend upon the regiment, and he knows that each of you is ready now as ever to sacrifice his life for his country and his king, therefore His Majesty trusts that the spirit that has always distinguished this regiment—the spirit of good fellowship—shall be always fostered, and especially, here in these rooms."

[Pg 19] The exalted personage paused, and a murmur of approval ran through the assembled officers and guests who were standing up to listen to the speech.

"Now the health of the regiment is going to be drunk," they all said, and they looked to see whether their glasses were full, for it was due to each man that in his own regiment his glass should be full.

But the expected conclusion of the speech was not immediately forthcoming; the exalted personage was visibly embarrassed, and it was apparent to everyone that he had still something to say, but could not for the moment find the right words. At last he regained his composure, and said: "Gentlemen, finally, His Majesty has commanded me to inform you that to-day he has transferred to your regiment Lieutenant Winkler, the son of His Majesty's commercial adviser, who was formerly in the 25th Infantry Regiment. And now, gentlemen," continued the Prince, in a louder tone, and visibly relieved, "lift your glasses to the prosperity of this magnificent regiment, whose officers unite in themselves the best names in the land, and whose subalterns and rank and file present a shining example of the most faithful fulfilment of duty—here's to the regiment. Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

They felt as if they had been throttled; such a sorrowful "hurrah" had never before [Pg 20] been heard, and it was a fortunate thing that the loud-sounding fanfare echoed through the hall.

The "hurrahs" were over, His Highness had taken his seat again, but the rest remained standing, staring at each other as if they could not have heard aright, as if each wanted to learn from his neighbour's face whether what he had just heard could really be the fact.

"We have become a plebeian regiment."

Nobody knew who pronounced the word first, but at once the phrase passed from lip to lip—"We have become plebeian."

It was just as if a jug of cold water had been thrown into their faces, and indeed when at last they sat down to the table again and the music struck up a merry *potpourri*, they could not grasp, they could not take it in, this inevitable thing—that once more a "commoner" was in the regiment.

All their gay spirits had fled; indeed it appeared to the officers of the "Golden Butterflies" as if a quite new spirit had taken possession of the building. The festival had lost its splendour; it seemed as if the silver itself suddenly shone less brilliantly, as if the glass were less finely cut, and as if the hall no longer possessed the unique elegance that had hitherto distinguished it.

A painful silence reigned at the table, the "Golden Butterflies" did not venture to [Pg 21] talk to their guests, for they knew they would be besieged by questions as to who and what this Winkler really was, where he came from, whatever could have caused His Majesty to transfer him from his frontier garrison town to this proud and distinguished regiment. It must have some signification. They did not venture even to look at their guests, for they knew that in the faces of the latter would stand clearly written: "You are no longer what you were; you cannot indeed help it that you have become plebeian, but the fact remains, and your position will be affected by this in the future."

If only the news that they were to receive a plebeian lieutenant had been communicated to them privately—but no, it had been announced publicly, in the presence of all the assembled guests, so that there was no possibility of denial or subterfuge. It was a direct slap in the face for them, and for the former officers, some of whom had come from a distance to be present at the dedication of the new buildings. And now into that new house a new element had been introduced. A commoner! Why had the regiment deserved it that the glory that had hitherto distinguished it should be removed? On the former occasion when a plebeian lieutenant had dwelt among them for a short time they had all suffered, and it was esteemed a special mark of the Emperor's favour that on the personally expressed [Pg 22] wish of the officers he had been transferred to a line regiment. When they were again relieved of the stigma, each had sworn to live more zealously for the honour of the regiment so that a plebeian should not for a second time be received in their midst. Now this very thing had happened.

The Uhlan had regarded for a long time his neighbour who was looking gloomily in front of him; now he felt impelled to utter a sympathetic word, and everything that he felt in the depth of his heart he put into the remark, "What a pity! you were all so jolly in your regiment."

The officer of the "Golden Butterflies" shrugged his shoulders. What did these words mean but this: "The beginning has been made, other commoners will follow this one, and even if he does remain the only one, you will never be again what you once were."

The Uhlans were considered a frightfully exclusive regiment, and the "Golden Butterflies" had made the greatest efforts to maintain friendly and cordial relations with them. At last they had succeeded, and to-day the Uhlans almost to a man had appeared; the most aristocratic of regiments had been *fêted* with a costly dinner; and now, scarcely had the friendship been sealed when it was immediately threatened.

All breathed more freely when at last they rose from the table; the "Golden [Pg 23] Butterflies" were most anxious to talk to each other, and learn something more of their new comrade. Somebody or other must know something about him; the fellow must have some sort of reputation—as much as was possible for a commoner, of course—otherwise His Majesty would not have interested himself on his behalf.

It was in this way that the men who had fallen into two groups—the guests, and the present and former officers—expressed their opinions; each had something to say as to his idea concerning the event.

The "Golden Butterflies" surrounded the adjutant of the regiment, Count Wettborn; he had become quite white, and was nervously fidgeting with the laces of his faultless patent-leather boots. After the colonel the matter concerned him most closely of all; he was often the representative and delegate of the officers, and now, was he to become a representative of a Winkler, he, a count? He was tall, of proud, imposing appearance; on his breast glittered as his latest decoration an order of the Fourth Class, which he had won as leader of the ball at court. For two years he had occupied this proud position; it was not only a great honour for him, but also for the whole regiment, and when he had stepped back into the rank he had been named adjutant, and all had heartily concurred in this promotion, deeming him the most worthy among them.

[Pg 24] "But, count, do tell us, you must know something, who is this Winkler, then?"

Anxiously they all looked at the count; dead silence reigned, they scarcely dared to breathe.

"Gentlemen," at last said the adjutant, "whatever the colonel and I know we have just learnt from His Serene Highness. Old Winkler is a manufacturer."

They felt as if a stone had been rolled from their hearts. A manufacturer! It was not up to much, certainly, and not to be compared, of course, with the social position of a country gentleman or a chamberlain; but still, Krupp had been nothing more nor less than a manufacturer, and the German Emperor had called him his friend before the whole world. A load was taken from their hearts; but immediately they all saw that the count had still something on his mind, and that the question of being a manufacturer had some connection with it.

"And what does the fellow manufacture? Cannon or machines?"

"Neither—trouser buttons." If a flash of lightning had suddenly struck the officers they could not have started more quickly and with greater horror.

"Good heavens!" They looked around to see if any of the guests or the orderlies were close by, and then they crowded round the adjutant again.

[Pg 25] Belitz, a very tall officer, was the first to recover himself; he was on very good terms with the adjutant, almost his friend indeed, and so he ventured to say, "Don't play any stupid jokes upon us, we are not in the mood for them, and such things should not be said in jest. Now do really tell us what the old fellow manufactures."

The count looked at the speaker calmly. "My dear fellow, I am not in the least in the mood for a joke, but I told you the fact. Old Winkler manufactures buttons, of course, wholesale. He has three large factories, and employs thousands of workmen, who are said to be splendidly looked after. For several years he has been on the Town Council, and for three he has been commercial adviser to the Emperor; quite lately he contributed a hundred thousand marks to a charitable institution which is under the special patronage of His Majesty, and he has also promised a contribution of twenty thousand marks for the next five years. He refused an important order that was offered him, and when he was asked in what way he could be thanked, he answered that it would be an intense pleasure to him if his only son might be transferred from a frontier garrison town to Berlin, so that he could see him more frequently. His wish could not be refused, and so his son has come to us."

After a slight pause, during which the deepest stillness reigned, the adjutant [Pg 26] continued: "The transference of Lieutenant Winkler to our regiment is at the personal request of His Majesty. It behoves us, therefore, not to criticise His Majesty's commands. I beg you to remember this, and to restrain any expressions of opinion."

It was perfectly clear and unmistakable that the adjutant spoke in the name, and at the request of the colonel, and silently one after another retired.

But the silence was far more expressive than words. Dejectedly the "Golden Butterflies" walked about; they had not the spirit to ask their guests to remain when, much earlier than usual, the latter prepared to depart. It was a matter of complete indifference whether they stayed an hour longer or not; the spirit of the thing had vanished; the festivity was ruined. The rooms were soon empty, one after another departed, only the "Golden Butterflies" remained. And they, when at last they were quite alone, asked themselves again, "Why have we deserved this?"

In one corner of the room, all huddled up on a sofa, sat young Willberg, the darling and favourite of all, a young lieutenant of six-and-twenty, whose father had been in the regiment and had won the Iron Cross of the First Class on that [Pg 27] memorable day. Young Willberg had evidently indulged somewhat freely in wine; he was in a state of abject misery, and wept and sobbed like a child.

"Willberg, whatever is the matter?" his comrades asked him sympathetically, as they came nearer him.

He raised his face which was usually fresh and youthful-looking, but now the glittering tears ran down his cheeks, and in a heart-breaking tone of voice he sobbed out: "My regiment, my beloved regiment."

Not a single one of those who stood around him could offer him a word of consolation—they were all as mournful as death.

[Pg 28]

CHAPTER II

Introduced to the Regiment

"To-day at twelve o'clock I desire to speak with the officers in undress uniform."

The colonel's command was communicated to all the officers, and now, full of expectation, they were standing outside the mess-room. To the questions: "What's the matter with the old fellow now? Has anyone got cleaned out?" the answer was immediately given: "Winkler came to-day and is to be introduced to us all."

And this universal answer was followed on each occasion by a universal "Ah"—an expression of the deepest commiseration and the greatest disappointment. Winkler had really come? How many ardent prayers had not been raised to heaven that he would *not* come! And in his innermost heart each man had still hoped that the order of exchange would be recalled. His Majesty had heard privately, through inquiries of an adjutant, what they thought about this new comrade; they had not concealed their [Pg 29] views, but instead of the hoped-for order of recall, the adjutant had one day reappeared, and had quite casually, and in the way of conversation, yet in spite of that, with an official air, given them to understand that His Majesty was very vexed at what he had heard of the officers' views concerning Lieutenant Winkler. His Majesty had expressed his sincerest hope that the regiment would receive their new member with open arms. The adjutant's words had not failed to have effect; not that the officers suddenly changed their views, but they took care not to say what they thought in his presence any more.

Now Winkler had really come. "What does he look like?" "What sort of an impression does he make?" "Has anyone spoken to him?"

There was a torrent of questions. Suddenly it struck twelve, and to the minute the colonel appeared with his adjutant and Lieutenant Winkler.

The first lieutenant motioned the officers to their places, and the colonel immediately began:

"Gentlemen, I have requested you to meet me in order to introduce to you our new comrade, Lieutenant Winkler. Allow me to introduce you, Lieutenant Winkler."

Lieutenant Winkler stepped forward and saluted in a friendly way; he stood there [Pg 30] erect and courteous, a man of medium size, slim, yet strong. He was a very well developed man, and the becoming uniform of the "Golden Butterflies," with its rich gold embroidery, suited him excellently; on his young and fresh-looking countenance—he was twenty-seven years of age—with its thick, light moustache, and in his clear, blue eyes, was written energy and independence. Many of the officers there present could scarcely conceal a certain unrest and embarrassment. Winkler's face alone remained absolutely cool.

The "Golden Butterflies" examined their new comrade with searching eyes, just as if they were examining a horse that had been led before them. They cast a glance at his figure, at his legs, looked him over to see if he would do well at a parade march, and whether his outward appearance was equal to the demands which were made on a member of so important a regiment. According as they were satisfied with their examination, they put their hands more or less cordially, or in some cases only a finger, to their caps.

"Lieutenant Winkler," continued the colonel, "a very great honour has been paid you; at the direct request of His Majesty you have been made a member of a regiment which can look back on a glorious past, and whose officers have always [Pg 31] been distinguished for the purity of their character, the gallantry of their spirit and their honourable lives, both as soldiers and gentlemen. You come among us from a different garrison, from totally different surroundings. You have been bred and reared in circumstances where people do not hold the same views as we do. It must be your first endeavour to become, in the truest sense of the word, one of us, for the uniform does not make the man, it is the spirit which puts the seal on him. And the financial material circumstances of a man are not without their influence on the *esprit de corps* of a regiment. You, Lieutenant Winkler, probably have the disposal of an allowance which is so large that it bears no relation to the small amounts which most of my officers have to do with. You, sir, have grown up in a circle where money plays the most important part, where, to a certain extent, the honour in which a man is held depends upon the size of his banking account. But our great pride is that, with our small means, or rather I should say, in spite of our small means, we remain what we are. In course of time you will see for yourself how many of your comrades are obliged to stint themselves merely to make both ends meet, and how they are obliged to deprive themselves of all kinds of things in order to maintain a dignified appearance. Although I am delighted to hear that, while you were living in a small [Pg 32] garrison town, you were economical and eschewed all luxuries, now that you are transferred to Berlin I must beg you most earnestly, and warn you most emphatically, to resist the various temptations that will assail you here. Keep to the modest mode of life, and do not fall into the fault, so easy to youth, of boasting of your riches and wealth, and of playing for large stakes with your comrades. If you attend to my admonition, then a friendly and cordial relationship will grow up between you and these gentlemen, to whom you are now a stranger." And, turning to the adjutant, he continued: "Count, I beg you to introduce Lieutenant Winkler now to the individual officers."

The introductions were made strictly according to etiquette, beginning with the lieutenant-colonel and ending with the youngest lieutenant.

It was only when the names of the lieutenants were read out that there was any sign of life in Winkler's bearing. During the colonel's long speech, and while the names of his superior officers were being read, he stood immovable, his hand in the attitude of salute—and everyone had to admit that he stood well—without moving or swerving. His face was so well under control that not a muscle moved, and not a line on his countenance betrayed what he felt at the colonel's remarks. When the names [Pg 33] of the lieutenants were given—he saluted the first lieutenants as his superiors—his bearing relaxed somewhat, and he returned the salutes of his comrades cordially. And he saluted well—everybody had to admit that likewise.

At last he was able to release his hand, and stand at ease once more; his arm was almost numb and the muscles of his legs trembled and smarted, but by no sign did he betray this.

"Lieutenant Winkler is placed in the second battalion, fifth company."

All glances were directed towards the captain of the fifth company, Baron von Warnow; he was considered the most important officer in the regiment; he was of very ancient descent, which he could trace back to the Emperor Barbarossa, in whose campaigns a Warnow had distinguished himself. He was married to a Countess Mäilny, had a very large fortune, and his house was considered the most aristocratic in Berlin. Whenever it was a question of representing the regiment, or of sending a deputation anywhere, it was Baron von Warnow who was always nominated. On account of his birth and his connection with the most important families in the country he was pre-eminently fitted for such appointments. And he was just as distinguished in his military career as in his private life. He permitted no swearing or bad behaviour among his officers. He attempted, as his comrades [Pg 34] laughingly said, to make a gentleman of every musketeer, and in his first lieutenant, Baron von Felsen, he had an excellent assistant. For the last fortnight he had only had one officer attached to his company, for a short time ago his lieutenant had been thrown while riding and had broken his arm. It would be at least a month before he could be on active service again, but it had never occurred to him that another officer would be assigned to him.

And now he was to have Lieutenant Winkler in his company—he, Baron von Warnow!

He could scarcely conceal his annoyance; his thick brows contracted, and he was about to mutter something in a rage when he met Winkler's glance. The latter, when he heard his captain's name, looked round to see which among the many to whom he had been introduced was Baron von Warnow. When he saw the latter's disappointed and almost furious countenance, he knew at once that that was the Baron! He fixed his eyes upon him almost as if he was saying: "What harm have I done you?" Perhaps his face became a shade paler, but his voice had its quiet, steady tone when he stepped up to his superior officer and saluted him.

Baron von Warnow returned the salute by a bare finger, then he said: "It would have been more in order if you had, first of all, saluted your major."

[Pg 35] Winkler flushed red, then he repaired the omission and stepped up to Baron von Masemann, his superior lieutenant, in order to get to know him a little better as they were to be in the same company. He took his friendliness as a matter of course, but he merely received a curt, "I am much obliged to you."

The colonel conversed with the staff officers; the other officers chattered in various groups. Winkler stood quite alone, nobody troubled about him, and he breathed more freely when the colonel at last dismissed the officers.

As Winkler was turning to go, his captain, who was talking to the first lieutenant, called to him: "One moment, if you please, Lieutenant Winkler," and after a little pause continued: "I do not know, Lieutenant Winkler, whether you are already aware of the fact, otherwise I had better tell you at once, that a thoroughly good and healthy tone is maintained in my company; I must therefore beg you to avoid all cursing and swearing, my men are accustomed to be treated as decent persons. It is a very great honour for you to be in my company, and it is to be hoped that you will strive to maintain it worthily." And turning to his first lieutenant he continued: "My dear baron, if at first Lieutenant Winkler does not find it easy to maintain the right tone, you will be kind enough to help him."

[Pg 36] The first lieutenant acquiesced with a salute, then the captain turned again to Winkler: "We shall see each other again to-morrow on duty; kindly give the sergeant-major your address, so that we may know where to send the orders."

"Certainly, sir."

"Then there is nothing more for me to say. I am obliged to you for coming, gentlemen."

The two lieutenants turned to go, and silently they walked together over the great courtyard. It was not till they had passed the door of the mess-room that the baron said: "We do not dine till six o'clock; will you join us in the mess-room for lunch?"

But Winkler declined. "I must go and report myself to the superior authorities, and, besides, I have still a good deal to do."

The other did not press him further, and so with a few words they took leave of one another.

Winkler called a fly; it was nearly three o'clock when he at last reached the hotel in which he had taken rooms for the time being.

"Have any letters come for me?" he inquired. He had had no news from home for three days; he had telegraphed to his parents that he would be in Berlin to-day, and he hoped to receive a warm letter of greeting from them.

The porter looked through the letters.

"Nothing has come for you, sir."

[Pg 37] Winkler could scarcely conceal his disappointment. Just to-day when he felt so terribly solitary and alone a kindly letter from his parents would have been so very welcome. He had been quite prepared for not being warmly welcomed by his new regiment, but he had not had the faintest idea that the officers would have received him with such coldness and such aversion.

"The key is in the room upstairs, sir."

With a troubled air he went upstairs. To his astonishment the door of the sitting-room was not locked, and when he opened it and walked into the rooms he was greeted with a loud, hearty laugh.

"Ha! ha! George, my boy, here's a surprise for you, isn't it? I told the porter I'd wring his neck if he told you of my arrival; for two hours I've been sitting here and waiting for you. Now, thank heaven, you're here at last. And how fine you look, my boy, your mother would burst with pride if she could see you now. Of course, the first thing you'll do is to go and be photographed."

And with justifiable paternal pride and the keenest delight the manufacturer to His Majesty embraced his son.

When George had at last freed himself, he said:

"Father, this is indeed a surprise. However did you get here?"

[Pg 38] The old man, about sixty years of age, of medium height and strongly built, with a broad ruddy face, large grey eyes and thick bushy brows, whose appearance all betokened iron will and energy and great self-confidence, looked at his son with a satisfied glance. "Do you know your father so little, that you thought he would let you be here alone to-day? I wanted to help you to find rooms, but above all I wanted to hear how things were going with you, and to hear everything that people had said to you to-day. Now begin and tell me everything."

George had taken off his helmet and scarf, and changed his military coat for a comfortable loose jacket; then he took one of the cigars which his father offered him, and sank down into a chair.

"Now, my boy, do begin and tell me everything; surely you can talk while you're changing your things. I know you always say, 'One thing at a time,' but I say one can do several things at the same time. Do you think I should have succeeded so well if I had done otherwise? Why, to-day, I had my lunch standing, with my left hand I ate, and with my right I wrote several notes, and at the same time I gave my clerks all kinds of orders and commissions. So now, fire away."

With an expectant expression the manufacturer looked at his son who still [Pg 39] remained silent, but at last he said: "Father, it's all happened as I told you it would when you said you had asked for me to be exchanged. It all happened precisely as I said it would, only it was ever so much worse."

The old man got up and looked at his son with wide-open eyes. "Do you mean to say——"

"I mean to say," continued his son, "that they received me in the regiment in such a manner as might have made me not only blush with shame but burn with rage and anger, as in fact I did inwardly. I was, however, able to control the expression of my feelings, as I always can. They treated me to a long discourse, they exhorted me to do my duty, and they kept on rubbing it into me that it was a tremendous honour to belong to their regiment."

"It certainly is that," his father agreed. "You should have seen how people opened their eyes when I told all our friends and acquaintances that I had been able to get you transferred to the 'Golden Butterflies.' In fact they would not believe it until they saw it in black and white. I assure you, my boy, it's not been an easy matter and it's an expensive luxury. Two hundred thousand marks is not a small sum; but I don't grudge the money."

"But, as far as I am concerned, I not only believe—I am convinced—it's money [Pg 40] badly laid out. When you wrote to me first of all that you were interesting yourself about my exchange, did I not beg you, as urgently as I could, not to continue your efforts? You laughed at me, and wrote, 'The "Golden Butterflies" will soon know what sort of a man they have in the son of the manufacturer by special appointment to His Majesty, and if they do not know they will soon have to learn it.'"

"And they will learn it, my son, I assure you."

George shook his head. "They will never do that, father, for they will never take the trouble to get to know me. They regard me as an interloper, a stranger. Even to-day I am quite sure that they are only waiting for the moment when they will be able to get rid of me decently. They will watch me closely, they will weigh carefully all that I say, everything I do, until at last they can find some ground for saying to me, 'My dear sir, you are not the right man for such a regiment as ours.' And one fine morning I shall find myself again in a little garrison town."

The old man burst forth—"Oh, oh, we've not got as far as that yet, and before that happens I shall have a word to say, I can tell you. I stand well in the Emperor's favour, and at the appointed hour I shall know how to open my mouth."

[Pg 41] George shrugged his shoulders. "Then it will be too late and of no use, and, besides, you would not like the officers to be forced to keep me against their will. I have suffered enough already in coming here contrary to their wishes, or do you suppose that I should not bitterly resent it that not one single word of welcome was given me, not a single hand was stretched out to me in greeting."

The veins stood out on the old man's forehead. "What do these stuck-up aristocrats mean? What do they pride themselves upon? Simply because they were by chance cradled in an aristocratic family. Is it any merit to them that they have a count or a baron for a father? I can't help laughing at them! If that is all that they can pride themselves upon, then I am, indeed, truly sorry for these stuck-up aristocrats. To be born the son of a noble is surely no merit; but to be, as I am, the son of an inferior official who, through his own energy and diligence, has worked his way up and reached an important position, that, indeed, is a thing to be proud of. And if these people do not understand that, it must be because they will not or cannot, because they are so pig-headed and stupid."

The manufacturer had jumped up, and was striding up and down the room in a rage. George understood his father and knew that when he was in that mood he must [Pg 42] give free vent to his fury, and must regain his composure before he was accessible to anybody's reasons. So he quietly let the old man rage, until at last, with a mighty curse, he sank into a chair again.

"Well," he said, "I am all right again now. I can't help thinking, my boy, you look at things in too black a light. One can't altogether blame these fellows for regarding you to a certain extent as an outsider, and if one takes a rational view of things it is quite understandable, that they did not receive you with outstretched arms. These officers do not know you; they know absolutely nothing about you except that you are the son of your father, and as I have not been born with a coronet on my head that's not enough for them. They must, and they will, get to know you yourself. When I consider the matter quietly, and I am in a sober frame of mind now, I must confess that the reception you had is not altogether displeasing to me. Lieutenants are not like schoolgirls who swear eternal friendship in the first five minutes. Why should the 'Golden Butterflies' be beside themselves with joy at the sight of you? Simply because you're a handsome fellow? No, no, my boy. It rests with you to make your own position in the regiment, and that you will make it I am perfectly certain."

"At least I will try, father, and it shall not be my fault if I do not succeed."

[Pg 43] "Why ever should you not succeed? Don't begin in that spirit. Hold your head high. Look courageously into the future. Whatever a man bestirs himself eagerly to get can be got—and there's no more to be said."

George acquiesced. "Yes, let us drop the subject; the future alone can decide which of us is right. But there is one thing I should very much like to know, and you did not answer that question in your letters—wasn't it my mother's idea to get me transferred from a line regiment to the Guards?"

The manufacturer laughed complacently. "Well, if you really must know you're right, my boy, in your surmise. You know your mother—she's a treasure, but she would not be a woman if the money, title, and position which men sing of did not turn her head a little. We live in good style nowadays, partly on account of your sister Elsa. We entertain a great deal, and sometimes it was not very pleasant for your mother when she was asked where you were, to have to admit that you were stationed in some miserable little place with a second-rate regiment. Of course, no one actually said anything, but your mother read quite clearly in their faces—'You see there are still some doors that money will not open.' That naturally vexed and [Pg 44] annoyed your mother and wounded her vanity; she has only one son you must remember, and in her opinion the best is not good enough for him. She dinned this so constantly in my ears that at last I did what she wanted."

"That is just exactly what I thought," said George. "I can see my mother doing this, how she coaxed you—I know every word that she said. Well, she certainly meant it for my benefit, and now I do hope she is very happy."

The manufacturer burst out laughing. "Happy, my boy? I tell you no words can express the happiness she feels now. She is always dressed nowadays in the best silk dress which was formerly reserved for the grandest occasions."

George could not help laughing, and they went on talking about the mother and sister, who was devotedly loved by her brother, of the home and the factory, until the hour struck, and George remembered that it was high time for him to be going to dinner.

The manufacturer made a wry face. "Can't we dine together? I thought that in honour of this day we might have ordered at a first-class restaurant a dinner which would have aroused the envy of the immortal gods."

"To-day that is quite impossible, father; on the very first day I must under no circumstances be absent from the mess dinner; perhaps to-morrow I may be free."

[Pg 45] The old man growled with vexation. "To-morrow is not to-day; however, it can't be helped." And then after a short pause he said: "Can I not dine with you in the mess-room? I thought perhaps I ought to call on your immediate superiors, or, at any rate, upon your colonel."

George was somewhat embarrassed. He was a good son, was proud of his father and greatly loved him, and just because of this he wanted to prevent people seeing anything odd in his manners at dinner; above all he was anxious that his companions should have no occasion to make remarks about anything in his behaviour that displeased them. Besides, he was afraid that his father, whose passionate, quick temper he was only too well aware of, might lose his self-control and make unflattering remarks which could only harm them both. So he said hesitatingly; "I'm afraid that would scarcely do, father; it is an old custom in the army that on the first time an officer dines with his new comrades he is invited by them as a guest, and as such he naturally cannot bring a guest with him."

The old man understood this more easily than George had dared to hope. "Very well, then, I must drink my Rhine wine by myself; we shall see each other again before we go to bed, and then you must tell me everything that happened."

[Pg 46] But when George returned about ten o'clock he had nothing much to relate, at least nothing very pleasant. The dinner had been all right; they had, of course, drunk his health, but that was all; the officers' quarters were splendid, and George gave a long account of these until his father at last said "Good-night" to him.

George went up to his room, but he lay awake a long time, and thought over what he had not related to his father. The oldest officer at dinner had bade him welcome briefly, but the words had sounded cold, and George said to himself that he only spoke because he was obliged to, and there was no heartiness in his words. The speech was followed by a cheer, glasses were clinked, and then the affair was over. No one had given him an invitation.

"Why did I not remain where I was? What's going to happen in the future?"

This question kept him awake a long time, and when at last he fell asleep he saw his mother's glad eyes beaming with joy at the distinction which had been given to her son.

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CHAPTER III

Among the Aristocracy

The regiment had been back from the manœuvres for five weeks, recruits had been enlisted, and the military and social festivities of the winter season in Berlin had begun. No one had looked forward to the beginning of winter more anxiously than George. Although he had been in the "Golden Butterflies" nearly six months he was still as much a stranger to all his comrades as on the first day, for all his attempts to fraternise with them had been frustrated by their passive resistance. Now that the winter festivities had begun he hoped to get into more friendly relationship with the officers.

To-day, Captain von Warnow, who had an elegant house with beautifully large rooms, was giving a dance, and had invited the whole regiment. Everybody was delighted, for entertainments at the Warnows were quite different from the usual official parties.

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The Warnow's niece, Fräulein von Wiedemann, a tall, slender, very beautiful brunette of three-and-twenty, was staying with them, as she did every winter. The young baroness was an acknowledged beauty, and although during the last year or two she had lost some of her charms, she was still considered a very beautiful girl. Her whole air and bearing were distinguished, for she was an aristocrat through and through. The Wiedemanns belonged to a very old family, and she had been strictly brought up in the principles of her class. Her father had been formerly an officer in a Guards regiment, for whom a great military future had been prophesied, but one day he had made a mistake during an inspection of his battalion, and now, as during his military career he had spent all his own limited private means, he lived with his wife and daughter in a small town on a pension of about four thousand marks (£200) a year. His only son was an officer in an important Artillery regiment. Great poverty reigned in the household of the pensioned major: the allowance which his son required to keep up appearances in his regiment swallowed up half his pension, and the other half, in spite of all efforts, was not sufficient to defray the ordinary expenses of living. Consequently the major was up to his ears in debt.

At first he had not troubled himself much about this. Hildegarde, his beautiful [Pg 49] daughter, would one day make a great match, and would then pay all his debts. But the years passed, and the splendid match did not come off. Hildegarde would never marry well as long as she remained in a little provincial town; then Frau von Warnow, who was connected with the Wiedemanns, and was very fond of Hildegarde, came forward and said she would find a suitable *parti* for her. Five years ago Hildegarde had gone to Berlin for her first visit; on all sides she had aroused admiration, their Majesties had noticed her at court festivities, but she was not yet engaged.

Not that suitors were lacking; one after another had endeavoured to win her favour, but each in turn drew back when he heard of her lack of dowry. None of the officers of the Guards—and neither Frau von Warnow nor Hildegarde would have looked at anyone else—was rich enough to marry a girl whose marriage portion consisted of her beauty and a whole family plunged in debt. For it was not only the father's debts that a son-in-law would have to pay, but a brother's, for the latter was known as a giddy spendthrift and gambler. Hildegarde's father could not in the least understand why after her first winter in Berlin she returned home without a *fiancé*. He had so absolutely reckoned upon a wealthy son-in-law that the non-realisation of [Pg 50] his hopes seemed to him like a terrible blow dealt him by Fate, and it was long before he recovered from it. But at last hope had sprung up once again in his heart, although there was really no prospect of anything for either him or his daughter. Hildegarde's brother also looked to her for deliverance; it surely must come one day, and he was so deeply in debt that he could only just keep his head above water by opportunely winning something at cards; but that could not go on for long. His rich relatives helped him now and again with £50 or so, but he never dreamed of using this for paying his debts, but usually gambled it away directly he got it. Whenever he was in a hole he would write to his sister: "Fulfil the hopes that are centred upon you; save us all, and do not be so haughty in your demands. It is true that the idea of a middle-class brother-in-law, who has probably never worn dress clothes and has moved in a quite different social circle, is abhorrent to me, still I'd put up with him if only he had money and was willing to help us."

Hildegarde scarcely ever read these letters nowadays, for she know beforehand what they contained. Her father was in the habit of saying exactly the same things when a bill came to the house, or her mother asked for money for housekeeping, or the servants demanded their wages. He always said on such occasions:

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"Put away your aristocratic pride until you have got a husband. There are any number of rich middle-class men who would be only too delighted to get for their miserable money a beautiful and aristocratic wife who would introduce them into Society and give them a good social position. When you have got your husband then you can be as aristocratic as ever you like, in order to impress him, and the more you show what a sacrifice you made when you accepted him, the more he will love and honour you."

Hildegarde could scarcely restrain herself from crying out: "What am I to do? I can hardly do anything more than allow myself to be exhibited and admired. I can't very well actually offer myself to the men. I am often so terribly ashamed that I scarcely know how to endure such a life, and what you say seems horrible to me. I cannot understand how you can talk to me in this way; you ought to have more respect for your daughter than to do so. It's money, money, everlasting money; and to pay your debts I am to sell myself to the first best man who offers sufficient for my body."

On such occasions violent speeches were on the tip of her tongue, but she always restrained herself, for she knew what a terrible struggle her father had, and how he [Pg 52] lay awake for hours racking his brains how to make both ends meet. When he had first left the army he had delayed trying to get an appointment, for then he considered it beneath his dignity to become the agent of an insurance company or something of the sort; now it was too late, and he was not young enough to get work. To the end of his life he was condemned to lead this miserable existence of an officer who had been pensioned early: there was neither career nor money for him. His wife suffered almost more than he did; she was an elegant, distinguished-looking woman, who longed to be back in Berlin and to share in the magnificent entertainments where she had been so much admired. A violent dispute had taken place between her and her husband when he retired to the provincial town; she would deny herself, she would put up with all kinds of deprivations, but she longed to breathe again the air she had formerly enjoyed. "Only wait a year or so until Hildegarde is married, and then we will go back again to Berlin," her husband had said to her again and again. And at last she had given in. At first she had firmly resolved to live very economically in the little town, but by degrees she was again the distinguished and elegant woman of society who could not alter her mode of living and her *toilettes*. She spoke to her daughter continually of her prospective marriage, and there were hours when she [Pg 53] did not scruple to reproach her child violently: "How is it that other young girls, who are not nearly so beautiful and elegant as you, get married? You must be either very stand-offish or you must make it too apparent that you want to get married. Both attitudes are unsuitable."

Hildegarde suffered terribly from the speeches and all the family circumstances, but she suffered even more on account of the visits to her relatives. It is true it was a pleasure to be in a rich household once again, to hear nothing of money worries; but letters from her parents followed her to Berlin with the request that she should borrow money for them from their relatives. Then again the gaieties were quite spoiled for her, because every evening before going to bed her aunt used to say, "Has nothing of importance happened to-day?" And even if her aunt did not actually say this, and tried not to let her see what she felt, Hildegarde noticed that it was no longer a pleasure to her aunt to take her about, for she saw the uselessness of all her efforts, and would have preferred her niece not to have visited her again.

This year Hildegarde had determined not to go to Berlin; her pride and her vanity revolted against being a burden to her relatives again, and playing a despicable, yet pitiable, *rôle*. She had often noticed both the contemptuous and the sympathetic [Pg 54] glances with which she had been greeted when she paid calls; some people privately joked at the idea of her not having given up thinking about a husband, others, knowing her straitened circumstances, felt sympathy for her.

"Under no circumstances will I go to Berlin this year," she declared to her parents. "I am too proud and too ashamed to exhibit myself again at all the parties, and yet get neither a lover nor a purchaser!"

The dispute lasted all day long, but at last her father, who was threatened with a warrant for distraint on account of a wine bill for five hundred marks, fell on his knees before her and begged her to save him. Then at last her opposition gave way. But she felt so wretched and miserable, so degraded and despondent, that during the long railway journey she constantly wept.

"My dear child, you have never before looked so out of sorts; what is the matter with you?" her aunt had asked her, and she had only been reassured when Hildegarde feigned a violent headache. Her aunt breathed more freely, but next morning and the following days Hildegarde's looks did not satisfy her, and it was impossible to conceal the fact that she was no longer the blooming young girl that she had been. Her aunt looked at her sympathetically, and more to herself than to her niece she said, "It's high time—high time!"

[Pg 55] "Yes, it certainly is," chimed in Hildegarde, "for I cannot bear this life any longer. If I do not get engaged this time—and I am convinced I shall *not*—I am going to get a place as a governess or a companion, or something of the sort. This I know—I won't go home again."

"Hildegarde!" Frau von Warnow looked with utter astonishment at her niece, who was sitting opposite her. She was very pale, her eyes had dark rings underneath them, there were melancholy, despondent lines round her mouth. "Hildegarde, do think what you are saying. You, to take a place. You, a Wiedemann! that is quite impossible; on our account alone it would never do, and you must consider us."

Hildegarde did not answer, but her eyes expressed resolution and determination, and Frau von Warnow poured forth her fears to her husband. "Just fancy," she said, "Hildegarde is determined that this will be the last time she visits us, and she is capable of carrying out her determination; if she does so, it will be a serious reflection upon us, and people will reproach us with not having given her enough money. They will say, 'How can such rich people as the Warnows allow a near relative to take a situation and earn her own living.' People will think us cold and [Pg 56] lacking in all decent feeling, and will say that even if Hildegarde could not have stayed at home, the proper place for her was with us."

Captain von Warnow looked indignant, and as a sign of his vexation he thrust out his underlip and twisted and twirled his faultlessly-pointed moustaches. "My dear Clara, pray spare me these matters; settle the affair with Hildegarde. I have more important things to think about—in a few days the major will be present at the drill, and, as you know, it may go off all right, but it may *not*."

"Quite so," his wife agreed. He did not perceive the irony of her words.

"Ah! I am glad you see that; then you will understand that at present I am more interested in the success of my men than whether Hildegarde accepts a post or not. You understand, don't you?"

His wife quite understood. For a long time her husband had been somewhat tired of acting as guardian to Hildegarde. He was very fond of her, but her family got on his nerves; he hated those perpetual begging-letters, but he always gave money, partly out of affection for his niece, partly because he felt he owed it to his position. He could not bear the idea of his cousin, whose ancestors had been distinguished in the Thirty Years' War, being summoned by a tradesman; such a thing was out of the [Pg 57] question. He would have much preferred that his wife had never taken upon herself the difficult task of getting Hildegarde married, for then he need not have been brought into close connection with her family. He could not help it, but whenever he received a letter from the Wiedemanns he felt as if he were dealing with something that was not quite clean, and as soon as ever he had read the letter he washed his carefully-looked-after hands with great ceremony.

Frau von Warnow was very much perturbed about Hildegarde; she could not possibly be allowed to take a situation; that would compromise them too much: at the same time she did not want her to live with them. There was only one way out of the difficulty; Hildegarde must get engaged during the coming season, but the question was—to whom? The night before her entertainment Frau von Warnow lay awake, turning over in her mind as to who should take Hildegarde in to dinner, and it was only toward morning that a happy thought occurred to her. It was such a simple one that she could not understand why it had not occurred to her before. Winkler, of course, must marry Hildegarde, and at breakfast she disclosed her plan to her niece, who listened to it with indifference; this man or that was just the same to her if she could be rescued from her miserable family circumstances, her wretched poverty, [Pg 58] and was not obliged to hear the oft-repeated and monotonous reproaches flung at her head. A quiet, resigned smile played on her finely-cut lips. "So this time the deliverer was called Winkler. I should much like to know what he looks like, though probably to you that is a matter of no importance. Is he nice?"

Frau von Warnow was somewhat embarrassed for a moment. "I don't know him yet."

"And yet you recommend him to me as a husband?" The words breathed irony and bitterness.

Frau von Warnow quickly recovered her presence of mind. "What do you want? He is very rich, his father is said to be a millionaire, he's simply made for you. Have I never spoken to you about him? Didn't I? Well, I suppose I forgot his name. One has as a rule, thank heaven, so little to do with these middle-class persons that one does not trouble to remember their names. Winkler, however, belongs to our regiment, he is in my husband's company; you know Eric's views concerning middle-class officers, but he is obliged to admit that this Winkler performs his duties most satisfactorily, and that probably in the course of a few years he will have won promotion. For Eric to say that is the highest praise. Up to the present, as you can quite understand, he has remained a rank outsider, although he must have been quite six months in the [Pg 59] regiment, for social prejudices cannot be cast on one side so quickly. Winkler has a difficult position here; if you became engaged to him everything would be altered in a moment—he would then be distantly connected with us; through you he would belong to one of the most distinguished families, and as your *fiancé* he would not only be invited by the most exclusive people, but—how exactly can I express it?—he would be made quite at home among them."

The last words were uttered with some difficulty by Frau von Warnow, and she was not quite honest in what she said. She knew, indeed, that she herself would never look upon Lieutenant Winkler as a relative, and that all the other aristocratic families would regard the marriage as a *mesalliance*; they would either not receive him at all, or confine themselves to entirely formal intercourse and the exchange of the necessary courtesies. But that was a matter of entire indifference; the important thing was to provide for Hildegarde.

Frau von Warnow was silent for a moment. She was quite exhausted by her long speech; then she turned to her niece and said: "Well, what do you think of my plan?"

Hildegarde said nothing; what would have been the use of saying, "It is hateful to get engaged to a man in this way; a man whom I do not know, whom I have never seen, and therefore I cannot tell whether I should like him or not." Her aunt was so occupied with her project that she did not notice Hildegarde's silence, she did not even wait for her answer, but said, "Of course, therefore, Lieutenant Winkler will take you in to dinner."

"But will it not look odd if I go in to dinner with an officer who has so lately entered the regiment when several of the older men will not be able to take in a lady?"

Frau von Warnow bit her lips with vexation. Hildegarde was quite right. She must not allow her project to be too apparent, and after a moment's thought she said:

"Yes, that won't do, certainly. Baron von Masemann must take you in to dinner, and Winkler must sit on the other side of you. As he comes to our house to-day for the first time and belongs to Eric's company, it will not attract attention if I give him a specially good place at dinner. Moreover, I intend to say a few friendly words to him before all the other guests. Perhaps, even, I shall get Eric to welcome him in a little speech."

But Eric objected. "That's going a little too far. I couldn't justify myself to my comrades if I did that, and I should arouse a violent protest. I cannot avoid asking Winkler to my house as he belongs to the regiment and is an officer in my company; but to toast him—to-day when, with the exception of the servants, he is the only middle-class man in our house—that is out of the question."

Von Warnow was, indeed, absolutely opposed to his wife's plan of betrothing Hildegarde to Lieutenant Winkler.

"Winkler a connection of mine! No, thank you. Later, I suppose, I shall have to be on quite intimate terms with the fellow. It would be far better for Hildegarde not to marry at all than to marry a plebeian."

He walked up and down the room indignantly, and only recovered his composure when his wife, quite against her real feeling in the matter, for she already saw the bridal pair standing at the altar, said:

"You jump to a conclusion too quickly. When that happens we can consider the matter."

The entrance of the servants, who had still many preparations to make for the entertainment, brought the conversation to an end, and it was now quite time to dress. So the husband and wife did not meet again till the first carriage rolled up to the door.

"Wherever is Hildegarde?"

At last she appeared, just as the first guests arrived. She looked charming in her cream robe, though there was a somewhat tired and anxious look upon her face.

 Carriage after carriage rolled up to the door, and the spacious reception-rooms were soon filled. All the guests knew one another and were frequent visitors at the Warnows, and conversation was soon in full swing. Most of them had not seen each other during the summer, and there were no end of questions as to where they had been during the holidays. They talked about the prospective gaieties of the season, of the court festivities, the programme of which had just appeared.

Lieutenant Winkler was apparently the last to arrive. He had purposely come late so that he might be introduced to the whole assembly at one and the same moment. He knew scarcely any of the ladies, for only the least important of them had included him in their visiting list. Was it by chance or intentionally that just as he came into the room dead silence reigned? George noticed that the ladies suddenly broke off their conversation and looked at him coldly. For a brief moment he was embarrassed, for even the lady of the house was unknown to him. Which was she? Then Frau von

Warnow came towards him, and Lieutenant Winkler took a step forward and kissed her hand.

"You are heartily welcome, Lieutenant Winkler. I am delighted to see you among us."

Everybody heard the words as Frau von Warnow had desired, and so nobody would be astonished later on if she were somewhat specially attentive to him. She exchanged a few words with the lieutenant, and then she introduced him to the ladies. Last of all she turned to her niece.

"Dear Hildegarde, allow me to introduce to you Lieutenant Winkler."

Hildegarde had purposely kept in the background. She had even attempted to avoid the introduction. It was disagreeable to her even to approach a man whom they had just been discussing in such a way that morning, and she could scarcely conceal her embarrassment. George did not observe this. He bowed and went into the corridor to take off his helmet and scarf. Hildegarde breathed more freely. Thank heaven! the first meeting was over, and she made up her mind to devote herself to the man who took her in to dinner and not trouble about Lieutenant Winkler. But when they went into the dining-room and took their places at the table, beautifully decorated with freshly-gathered flowers, Hildegarde saw, only too soon, that during the year in which she had not seen her companion he had not become more amusing or wittier. Baron von Masemann belonged to a very ancient family and was a conscientious officer, but otherwise he was a nonentity. All his efforts were directed towards being considered the best-mannered man among a set of well-mannered men, and this was a somewhat difficult task in a regiment that numbered counts and barons. Thus he felt it behoved him, by his whole behaviour and bearing not to abrogate his dignity in the slightest degree. He was haughty and reserved because he considered this to be well bred, and he spoke little, for he thought an aristocrat should speak little but observe much. So now at the dinner-table he merely inquired of his companion in the politest possible manner how she had been during the long period when he had not had the pleasure of seeing her. He asked her how long she meant to stay in Berlin, and when he had received this information, which did not in the least interest him, he considered he had done his duty. He remained silent, and when Hildegarde tried to entertain her companion he listened with an artificial air of interest, and as a sign that he was paying attention to her he now and again threw in a "Yes" or "No," or other equally striking remarks.

"Baroness, would you be so good as to pass the sauce-tureen?"

Hildegarde, with an "Excuse me," turned to her right and took the bowl from George to pass it to her neighbour on the left.

"May I trouble you again?" Once more she turned to the right and looked at George for the first time; until now she had studiously avoided him, and she was astonished at the intelligent expression and the seriousness of character which his eyes revealed; there was nothing of the Guardsman about him, for their only ambition was to appear *blasé* and amusing. Another thing about him pleased her: that was the look of genuine admiration and respect with which he regarded her. She noticed that he was attracted to her, and that her beauty made a deep impression upon him; she was extremely pleased to find that, unlike most young lieutenants, he had not begun by paying violent court to her, and acting the part of the irresistible male who has only to use his eyes to attract every girl to him.

"Appearances may be deceptive, of course," thought Hildegarde, "but I have picked up a good deal of knowledge of human nature during the last few years, and if I am not mistaken this is a good and sensible man." She suddenly became desirous of talking to him. Apparently he had not the courage to address her, perhaps he did not know what to say to her a complete stranger, so she must begin the conversation. It occurred to her that she might try and win the young officer's heart, and also his money, so that at last she might rescue her parents and brother from their dire poverty.

A crimson flush mounted to her cheeks, and she bent low over the plate so that he might not observe it. Lieutenant Winkler misinterpreted her embarrassment and said frankly: "I beg your pardon, if my glances have perturbed you in any way. As excuse I can only say that never before have I seen so much beauty and grace united in one person; I had no intention of making you feel uncomfortable."

The words sounded so frank and honourable; but far from having the desired effect, they produced just the contrary feeling; once again the blood rushed to her cheeks, for she felt she was playing a poor part towards this young officer. At last she recovered her composure, and with an attempt at badinage, she said: "What, you begin to pay compliments before the champagne comes! still, one can't help liking them when they are expressed so pleasantly."

"I am so glad that you are not angry with me," was his reply.

And now that the ice was once broken they began to chatter to each other. George possessed the gift of conversation to a high degree as Hildegarde soon noticed; he had a very pleasant voice, and this added to her pleasure in listening to him. From every word that he spoke she could see that he was a thoroughly cultivated man, who had studied much and took an interest in a great many subjects. In knowledge and general intelligence he was certainly far superior to his companions. "If I had not [Pg 67] gone into the army I should have studied political economy," he said in the course of conversation. "My father has a large manufactory and employs countless workmen; he is unceasingly occupied in trying to improve their social and material position; he sees that they have cheap and good dwellings; he has built libraries, given play-grounds and open-air spaces for the children; in short, he has done all that was possible to improve their condition. Of course, my father has talked to me about all these things; he gave me all sorts of books to read, and explained what I could not understand. As I said to you, if I had not gone into the army I should have interested myself in the social question."

"Why did you go into the army, and are you satisfied with your career?"

He answered her second question only. "I have now been six years in the army, and cannot say with a simple 'Yes' or 'No' whether my military duties will satisfy me permanently. Naturally, I hope and believe they will, but if later I see I have made a mistake, then I shall leave the service, and take over the management of the factory, for my father has given me a completely free hand. Of course, what I do in the future naturally depends upon whether I get promotion in the regiment as you will understand without any further explanations from me."

[Pg 68] He skilfully turned the conversation to another subject and told her more about the factory. Hildegarde listened with great interest, for everything that she heard was quite new to her. She had not the faintest conception of the life and labour of other people, and until then had never indeed thought about such things. In the circles in which she moved people either lived on their money or regarded work more or less from the point of view of suitability to a person's birth, or they lived as *grand seigneurs* in poor circumstances, and regarded it as beneath their dignity to work for money.

The time passed very quickly; Hildegarde confined her attentions to George, and forgot all about Baron von Masemann. The latter made several attempts to address some feeble remarks to her, but when he saw that she went on talking to George he closed his mouth tight. He generally occupied himself at dinner with observing carefully how his younger companions behaved and whether their manners and behaviour at dinner called for any report. This was his speciality, and on account of this he was feared, for there was scarcely any entertainment which did not give him an occasion for rebuking his comrades next day. As he was considered a great authority on etiquette, people were really very grateful for his instructions, but [Pg 69] unfortunately he had a terribly sarcastic and ironical way of delivering his words of wisdom, which irritated the younger officers far more than a torrent of abusive words.

Hildegarde looked up quite astonished when she suddenly saw that the guests were rising. How often had she not longed for the dinner to end when she had sat by the side of a lieutenant who told her about his stupid recruits or stale stories which had no connection with one another. Now, on the contrary, she was sorry that the dinner was over.

A little dance concluded the entertainment, and it was towards midnight when the guests departed. Scarcely had the last gone when Frau von Warnow embraced her niece warmly. "Hildegarde, I am happy. I was continually watching you two at dinner and during the dance. Lieutenant Winkler couldn't take his eyes off you. Mark my words, this time the thing will come off; it was easy to see that the man was infatuated with you. To-morrow I shall write to your father."

These words affected Hildegarde like a stream of cold water. For the first time for many a long day she had really enjoyed a party, and during the pleasant conversation she had quite forgotten her parents and her own miserable circumstances; now that the whole thing stood out clearly in her mind she was utterly depressed.

"Remember what I say, Hildegarde, in less than three months you will be [Pg 70] engaged. If you had always been as amiable and friendly to men as you were to-day to Lieutenant Winkler you would have been married long ago. Well, to-day you played your cards well; Winkler is certainly in love with you."

If Hildegarde had received a blow on the forehead she could not have felt it more than these words. During the course of the evening she had completely forgotten her aunt's project with regard to Lieutenant Winkler, and now she was accused of trying to ensnare him, and this insulting insinuation was regarded by her aunt as the highest praise. An indignant answer half rose to her lips, but as usual she restrained herself. She had long ago given up trying to justify herself; her aunt would not have believed her, she would not indeed have understood it.

She was delighted when at last she could go to her own room, where she burst into a flood of passionate tears. She was conscious of having done nothing wrong, and yet she felt as if she would like to sink into the earth for shame.

[Pg 71]

CHAPTER IV

A Game of Cards

It was some weeks later. The fifth company came on guard at mid-day and George was on garrison duty. He was in an extremely bad temper, for he had just been obliged to give a piece of his mind to a sub-lieutenant, named Nissew, who was a great favourite of Captain von Warnow. The captain was most particular that there should be no swearing while on duty, and he required his subordinates to act as perfect gentlemen. George had long perceived that this was ridiculous; he himself detested blows, ill-treatment and brutality towards inferiors, but on the other hand he knew quite well that at the right moment a few strong words worked wonders. You couldn't manage otherwise in the army; the men indeed expected that now and again a sounding curse should descend on their heads. But the captain was so excessively polite that he indeed would like to have addressed his men as "Herr So-[Pg 72]and-so!" The men of course laughed at their superior behind his back, and in George's opinion the company did not work nearly hard enough. The Poles and East Prussians in his former regiment had been far more active and well-drilled soldiers, it seemed to him, than these troops on parade, who were handled with silk gloves. The under officers naturally followed in their captain's footsteps, partly because they agreed with him, but largely from an instinct of self-preservation, for Herr von Warnow ruthlessly got rid of any subordinate who had once earned his anger by cursing or swearing. To George the most disagreeable of all the inferior officers was von Nissew, a one-year service man, who on account of his noble birth was regarded as an *enfant gaté* by the captain, and was later to be made a sergeant-major; he was a time-server of the worst kind, was always faultlessly dressed, and his outward appearance made a very good impression. George did not know how it was, but from the very first day he had taken a dislike to him; he distrusted his cunning grey eyes, and it was extremely unpleasant to him that just this particular officer should be placed in his company, to a certain extent to give him instructions, and to be able to say to him, "Captain von Warnow desires that such and such a thing should be done."

George did not like the way in which he treated his men. Nissew was always [Pg 73] almost exaggeratedly polite to his inferiors, yet somehow in his words there sounded a secret threat. George had often noticed how the people trembled before his piercing, scrutinising glance. This very day he had been struck by something; the sub-lieutenant was giving instructions to a man who had on several occasions made a bad appearance on parade duty, apparently with the greatest politeness, but his glance had augured nothing good. When George had turned away he heard the officer whisper to the man, "Before you go on guard come to me. I want to say a word to you, and arouse your sense of honour." The soldier turned pale, and George had thereupon called the officer aside. He knew the meaning of that expression "arouse a feeling of honour," he knew that it was generally accompanied with blows and curses. He said as much to the sub-lieutenant, forbade him to summon the man, and exhorted him earnestly to do nothing that was not allowed. Nissew assumed an utterly astonished and injured expression. How could Lieutenant Winkler think such a thing about him? He had never done anything wrong. Captain von Warnow knew that perfectly well, and therefore he had given him permission, once for all, to call the men to account if they did not do their duty satisfactorily. The sub-lieutenant [Pg 74] walked off with a highly-injured expression, and George knew that immediately the captain came he would be rebuked because he had dared to cast doubts on his subordinate.

And so it was. Captain von Warnow saw immediately that something was the matter with his favourite, and asked him what it was. Nissew knew perfectly well that he could only make a complaint of his lieutenant after twenty-four hours had elapsed, if he were not to render himself liable to punishment. So at first he hesitated, but at the direct command of his superior he related what had happened, but he related it in such a way that though it purported to be merely a description, it was really a complaint of the insult he had just received. Herr von Warnow listened silently, then he said: "I must speak to Lieutenant Winkler." He spoke severely to him. "It has often seemed to me, Lieutenant Winkler, that you are suspicious and distrustful of Sub-Lieutenant Nissew; I can assure you he is one of the best officers in my company. You have only known him for six months. I have known him for three years. He has never given me the slightest occasion to reprimand him, but his zeal and enthusiasm for his military duties will suffer if you are continually worrying him, and it must deeply wound him if you really think him capable of such shameful behaviour, as ill-treatment of the soldiers certainly is. I beg you to consider my words very seriously."

[Pg 75] When, therefore, George returned to his own division it was extremely disagreeable to him to have to share duties with Nissew; he saw quite clearly the malicious glance that he now and again gave him on the sly, and yet he had to act as if he saw nothing. He had no desire to rebuke him a second time, and to be rebuked himself a second time; the relations between him and his captain had so far been tolerably pleasant. He did not want to destroy them intentionally. "Whatever does it matter to me?" he said to himself at last; "after all, it is not I who am responsible for the men but the captain, and if he thinks his lieutenant the epitome of perfection it is all right."

He therefore determined not to trouble himself any more about his subordinate, and after a few weeks he discovered that this was the most sensible thing to do. Captain von Warnow had inquired whether he left Nissew alone, and when the latter replied in the affirmative he became quite friendly with George again.

As far as his military duties were concerned, George got on very well; his men had been praised on inspection parade, his drill during the winter had been considered good, and the performance of his duties as an officer had been well spoken of. He was really an excellent officer; his appearance on parade, his personal bearing and [Pg 76] his behaviour to his subordinates gave occasion for no adverse criticism; he was strict and honourable, and impartial in his treatment. Thus he soon won the respect of his men, and when one day his orderly fell ill, and the sergeant-major asked who would voluntarily act as Lieutenant Winkler's servant, almost the whole company offered. Even Captain von Warnow was pleased when he heard this, and his men's behaviour filled George with justifiable satisfaction; it was a delightful feeling to him to know that he had been able to win his men's affection to such an extent.

Officially things were going on well with George, but socially he was no better off than on the first day he had entered the regiment. He was obliged to confess himself that he had not advanced one step. It was certainly not his fault. He was not extravagant in his mode of life, he was modest in his behaviour, courteous towards his elders, and from a remark he had heard by chance he knew that his comrades thought highly of him for not being ostentatious with his money, and for "messing" just as they did.

George had made several attempts and had really exerted himself to try and get to know some of his comrades better, to discover their true character, and find out whether the distant and reserved air that they always wore was a mask, or [Pg 77] corresponded to their real nature. In this particular respect he was specially interested in his colleague in the company, Baron von Masemann. Even in intercourse with his contemporaries he acted as if he were at court. An artificial restrained air reigned at meals, so George thought; they talked a good deal, of course, but there was no harmless fun, no unconstrained merriment. George was horribly bored. They only talked court gossip and told pointless stories which could only have interest for the others because they referred to the most aristocratic circles; and as George did not even know the names of most of the families mentioned, the conversation was absolutely uninteresting to him. Not a single serious subject was ever touched upon; George contented himself with the part of listener, and thus as he found little opportunity of joining in the conversation he did not get any more intimate with his comrades.

In the regiment the officers had gradually accepted the unalterable fact that George was to be one of them, but that was all. If they no longer shed tears because he was there, still they could not pretend they were pleased; they were quite polite to him, but they erected these social barriers which excluded all confidence and intimacy. Thus it came about that George had not a single friend in the regiment. All maintained a certain reserve towards him, more especially his contemporaries, [Pg 78] though George had shown himself friendly in all his relations with them. Curiously, the most haughty among them all was the one who attracted him most. This was Lieutenant von Willberg, the one who had burst into tears when he heard of George's transference. He was possessed of an incredible pride, but he had his saner moments, as George called them, and then he was a lovable, happy, delightful creature; his adorable youthful light-heartedness showed itself, and then George quite understood how, in spite of everything, in spite of the warp in his nature, little Willberg was the darling and the pet of the regiment. George did not know how Willberg had felt about his coming into the regiment, and he had often wished to know him better, but so far the opportunity had not yet offered itself.

One day when George came into barracks he found a large company assembled there. Various guests had been invited, comrades from other regiments, mostly Cavalry officers. Of course the guests sat at the upper end of the table with the older officers of the "Golden Butterflies," and it was not without envy that those sitting at the lower end of the table regarded them. Even the Guards-Infantry were impressed by the Hussars and Uhlans, for the Cavalry officers were considered the most distinguished body in the army. Everybody saw how delighted the "Golden [Pg 79] Butterflies" were to see their distinguished guests among them. They vied with each other in amiability, and even the elder chiefs and some of the younger staff officers, who were bachelors and daily dined together in the mess-room, made no concealment of the pleasure the visit gave and how honoured they felt. When they all rose from the table to take their coffee and cigars in the smoking-room, the guests were invited to take the large comfortable easy chairs, and the "Golden Butterflies" stood around them in a semi-circle. Each tried to gain the notice of the Cavalry officers and to be very attentive to them. To be invited to dine by the Cavalry Guard was a distinction for which all strove; for only when one had dined with them was one considered quite "tip-top"; the officers of the Guards accepted invitations from allied regiments, but they themselves were excessively careful in the choice of their guests. Little Willberg literally flung himself at their heads. He stood near Baron Gersbach, whose people came from his own district, and played the part of the darling of the regiment, and tried to engage his guests in an interesting conversation. Apparently this did not make the least impression upon the Uhlan, who stretched out his legs, and carelessly smoked one cigar after the other.

But little Willberg was most anxious to impress the Uhlan in some way or other, if [Pg 80] not as a pleasant companion then as a clever, sharp-witted fellow, and so he said to him: "How would it be if we had a game of cards?"

They spoke quite openly in the barracks about card-playing. It is true it was forbidden, and indeed at regular intervals the most stringent orders against playing for money were publicly read out, and listened to with that respect which is proper for commands emanating from such high places, but further than this no one troubled about the prohibition. The military authorities knew all about it, but they shut their eyes, and indeed it sometimes happened that the colonels themselves played with their own officers. What could the military authorities do? In a little garrison town it was easy enough to see that an order was carried out, but in a large town it was utterly impossible. The officers would play, and if they were not allowed to play in the barracks or the mess-room, then they would gamble in some club or in another regiment or in their own homes. Whoever means to gamble will find an opportunity. Officially of course, it was said, officers are not allowed to gamble; but one must distinguish between gambling and gambling. If a fellow lost twenty marks it didn't matter to anybody, and if he lost a hundred, what did it matter? And if a man has the misfortune to lose a thousand marks surely he isn't more liable to [Pg 81] punishment than if he had only staked twenty? If the military authorities intended to punish everybody who touched a pack of cards, then the number of officers in any one year would be reduced by half. The lieutenants who played would, of course, be punished, and the colonels in whose regiments gambling went on would run the risk of dismissal because they had not seen that the stringent regulations concerning gambling were carried out. Now, a man who is a colonel naturally wishes to become a general, and he is not likely to risk his military reputation by giving information which he can suppress if he likes.

Little Willberg repeated the question which the Uhlan at first thought it beneath his dignity to answer. At last he looked at him somewhat astonished: "You had better take care, you will lose your money; are you so very rich that you don't mind losing it?"

Willberg slapped his pockets cheekily: "They're quite full to-day, I've just had a remittance."

Willberg could not account for it, but suddenly he had an odd feeling. It had taken a long time to squeeze a thousand marks out of his old father to pay some of his most pressing debts. He had therefore the feeling that it was not quite right to risk any on a game of cards, but he would rather have died than confessed it now. Had he done [Pg 82] so he would have for ever blamed himself and made himself supremely ridiculous in the sight of those beautiful patent-leather boots and silver spurs, which were the things that impressed him most in the Uhlan. However, he determined not to risk more than half of his cash; if he lost that, then the affair was over, if he won, then he would reconsider matters.

Baron Gersbach was known as a great gambler, and it was an open secret that it was only through gambling that he managed to keep his head above water. He had long ago spent his inheritance, and did not receive a penny beyond his pay, and yet his pockets were always full of bank-notes. Many people wondered why he was allowed to remain in the army. It was said that he enjoyed the protection of those high in authority. The story went that even his superior officers and men of the highest rank had played with him. Curiously enough he was an excellent officer, and an exceedingly good rider, who had often distinguished himself at the races. He might almost have been called a professional gambler, though he was known to gamble perfectly honourably and straightforwardly. He did not gamble every day, but only from time to time, when he was driven to make a great *coup*, but even then he only touched cards when an inward voice told him: "To-day you will win." If he was [Pg 83] not quite sure about this, he could not be induced to join in a game of cards; thus, whenever he played he won, and people were really astonished that he could ever find anyone who was willing to lose his money to the baron. But, of course, each of them hoped that his case would prove the exception, and so again and again men were willing to risk their luck. All those who had not already played with him regarded it as a great distinction to be invited to do so, and indeed anybody who had not played with Baron Gersbach at least once, was considered not quite the thing.

They did not begin to play cards, to a certain extent from politeness, until the staff officers had left the room. One of the majors indeed found it extremely difficult to go, for he was an inveterate gambler and would gladly have stayed behind; everybody was quite aware of this. Still he really owed something to his position; he could not very well win money from his subalterns—at any rate not in barracks—that wouldn't do at all.

Scarcely had they left the room when all constraint was abandoned, and George observed his comrades with considerable astonishment. They had often played cards in his presence, but he had never seen them like this before; it was the first time that they had cast on one side their air of elaborate repose and faultlessly correct [Pg 84] behaviour. It seemed as if an evil spirit had taken possession of them, a mad intoxication, the passion for gambling had seized upon them all, they were nervous and excited. They were all asking themselves whether they were going to win or lose, one saw it by the excitement in their eyes, their pale faces, the nervous twitching of their hands.

Only one man was absolutely calm, and that was the Uhlan. With his legs wide apart, he sat leaning back on the sofa, and did not trouble himself in the least degree about the preparations for the game. Whether he was inwardly as calm as he looked, who could say? Outwardly, at any rate, he did not betray the faintest excitement.

At last the card-table was all ready, and the adjutant of the regiment, Count Wettborn, turned to Baron Gersbach and said: "Well, what do you say, shall we have a game of cards?"

Much depended on the Uhlan's reply, for if he had said "No," the whole thing would have been quite different; they would just have had a harmless, pleasant little game. But to-day the Uhlan was in the right mood for playing—to-day on getting up he had felt cheerful and happy, and an inward voice had told him: "To-day you can again risk a large sum of money." In spite of this, however, the cautious creature had said to himself: "If my Leda gets over the hurdles to-day without breaking her neck, I [Pg 85] will risk it," and his Leda had jumped over them three times like a darling. He had looked into his carefully-kept diary to see which regiments he had not visited for a long time; his choice fell on the "Golden Butterflies," and he was glad, for they would pay a couple of thousands for the honour of his visit without murmuring and grumbling. So he telephoned to the adjutant to ask if he might dine with them and bring a couple of his good friends with him. Count Wettborn was not a particularly intelligent person, but he quite understood the meaning of the message, and as he himself was a keen gambler, he was only too delighted to say yes.

With inimitable nonchalance the Uhlan got up from the sofa and sank down into a chair which his attentive friends placed for him. Then he dived into his pockets and brought out his pocket-book, and the others noticed with a certain amount of misgiving the roll of bank-notes that bulged out. They remembered the true principle of all gambling; you can only win at cards if you have a large amount of capital, and can hold out when the luck is against you. The Uhlan had the necessary capital, and who therefore could hope to win against him? Then the adjutant, Count Wettborn, put his pocket-book on the table, and the "Golden Butterflies" were extremely proud [Pg 86] when they saw his purse; it was a little heirloom which he always carried about with him, for the count belonged to a very rich family, besides which, he was heir to an uncle who often gave him large sums of money.

"Really, our adjutant's a fine fellow," whispered one "Golden Butterfly" to another. "We really have a right to be proud of him: from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet he's tip-top. I believe even the Cavalry officers envy us him."

The other players dipped into their pockets; some who carried their money in bank-notes in pocket-books, more or less ostentatiously, whilst others who kept their possessions in a purse, furtively drew out a few gold coins—at the game of "Sieben" the stake began at twenty marks.

Little Willberg took out his £50 bank-note. Although he was heavily in debt he felt very proud of his possessions; and as he walked through the streets of the city he had held himself erect and lofty, thinking that everyone must see that he had a £50 bank-note with him. He had felt very rich then, but now in comparison with the sums that glittered forth from the others' purses, he seemed miserably poor; he was ashamed of his limited means, and was filled with envy and ill-will. It was a miserable and deplorable state of affairs always to be obliged to bother about money, and to have to [Pg 87] say to oneself: "You mustn't do this and that," and to be perpetually forced to borrow. It would be glorious, even if only for once, to possess a purse full of money; above all, to be able to carry about bank-notes—that would be really too exquisite for anything. If one were stationed in an out-of-the-way little garrison, of course it wouldn't matter whether one had much or little money; but in Berlin, where one mixed with so many distinguished rich people, like those who were their guests to-day, then it was indeed a miserable thing to possess nothing but one wretched £50 note!

The game had gone on for a long time—the Uhlan kept the bank. "Well, Willberg, won't you stake something? you were so impatient to play a little while ago."

Willberg roused himself; he had been deep in thought; the gold that was clinking on all sides glimmered before him, he had only one wish, one thought to possess it all.

"Yes, yes, of course I will play. A hundred marks on the seven—no, two hundred." A second later and he had lost the money.

"Two hundred again." He lost that.

"Two hundred again." This time he had good luck, and fourteen hundred marks were counted out to him. Again the seven came to him, he had staked four hundred upon it, and so he won back nearly three thousand marks.

[Pg 88] Little Willberg was astonished; he felt as if he had done a wonderful thing. Even the Uhlan cast upon him a glance of recognition, and when he had paid him his winnings, gave him a hearty "bravo." This praise made Willberg so proud that he immediately staked four hundred marks upon the seven, and lost it.

George had looked on at the game for a considerable time without taking any share in it, now he began to tire of it, and thought he would quietly retire. He went through the reading-room, when someone suddenly called him by name, and when he turned round he saw the first lieutenant, von Kirchberg, in an easy chair.

"Where are you going?" he asked him.

George felt he was caught, for it was not considered the correct thing to go off in this fashion, but he said nevertheless, "I meant to go home."

The other looked up astonished. "Have you come to the end of your tether? Have you lost all your money, then?"

"I never play, sir."

"What!" the other almost dropped his eyeglass in his astonishment, and looked at George for a long time speechless. "What!" he said once more, then he continued: "Come here and sit by me—you must tell me—how you manage to get along without playing cards, or rather how can you resist the temptation!"

[Pg 89] "That's not a difficulty for me, sir, gambling has absolutely no attraction for me. A couple of years ago I was at Monte Carlo, and watched the gambling for hours together, but I never had the slightest desire to stake a penny."

"What, really!" Again the other looked at him as if such ideas were beyond his comprehension. "Really, I can't understand it. What then do you do with your money if you don't play cards?"

"What I don't spend during the month I put into the bank."

"Well, but what's the use of that—I mean what's the fun of it? Why don't you spend all your money? You're not a tradesman but a young lieutenant. Well, all I know is, that if I had your money I shouldn't put any in the bank."

"I say, Kirchberg, wherever have you hidden yourself?" said a comrade who just then came into the room. "We are still playing *Half-part*: the first lot of capital has gone to the devil. Have you got any money about you?"

"Is the Uhlan still winning?"

The other scratched his ears. "Yes, horribly."

Kirchberg lit another cigar. "Then we will first let him get to the end of his tether. Let him first win other people's ducats, and then we'll try to win them back again. Who is at the present moment in his toils?"

"Little Willberg. The fellow's had extraordinary luck to-day; he stakes each time
[Pg 90] on seven, which has been thrown down five times in succession. He's just revelling in gold, and the Uhlan naturally wants to win back the money."

"Is Willberg calm?"

"How could he possibly be? He's trembling with excitement in all his limbs."

"What a pity! for then all's up with him. However, I want to see the thing."

He got up and went back into the card-room, and almost involuntarily George followed him. He felt as if he wanted to help Willberg, to whisper in his ear, "Be prudent; stop in time; put your winnings in your pocket; you have plenty for the present."

But Willberg had not the least intention of stopping. For a start the luck had been against him, but now he won time after time. The other officers had long ceased to play and were watching these two. Willberg was excited and nervous, feverish and trembling. The Uhlan, on the contrary, was absolutely calm, immovable as brass; not an eye-lash quivered, and his hand did not tremble in the slightest degree when he pushed over the winnings to his antagonist. He had to count out huge sums of money. The amount that he had won as banker had long vanished; the bank-notes which he had brought from home had dwindled down to a tiny heap. Gold and paper [Pg 91] money was heaped up in front of Willberg, probably to the amount of about twenty thousand marks.

The Uhlan counted out his money. "I can stake for the last time a thousand marks on the seven. If I lose and have to pay out seven thousand marks, I shall break the bank."

An indescribable excitement took possession of them all. Never before had they seen the Uhlan lose so much, and the "Golden Butterflies" were filled with pride that one of their officers should have caused this extraordinary state of things.

The last stake! The seven had so often brought Willberg good luck, surely it would stay with him to the end.

"A thousand marks on the seven."

The banker shuffled the cards. "Eight!" and he shovelled in the money.

"A thousand on the seven again."

The cards showed the six! For one moment the Uhlan's eyes glittered. Now he knew he had won the game. It could not last more than a quarter of an hour, for he had won back all he had lost. It really would have been inconceivable that he could have lost to-day, especially to a mere child like this, who gambled so imprudently and thoughtlessly that he must lose everything he had won. And Willberg went on losing; the heap of money shrunk more and more. Several times some of his comrades were [Pg 92] on the point of saying, "Stop; save at least a couple of thousand marks." But that wouldn't do; it wouldn't be fair. As earlier they had allowed the Uhlan, who was their guest, to get to the point of losing everything, they could not now warn Willberg.

"Now, Herr Willberg, have you the courage to go on?"

He sat there, white as a corpse; every drop of blood had vanished from his face. He had lost all; his £50 note of which he had been so proud; not the smallest gold coin did he possess.

"Will you go on playing?" the Uhlan asked for the second time.

Willberg looked round. Perhaps one of his companions would lend him some money. But the adjutant stepped in: "No, that's enough for you to-day. Some of us others will now try our luck."

They went on playing, but Willberg went into an ante-room and sank down on a sofa. Suddenly he was overcome by a nervous reaction; he buried his face in his hands and burst into convulsive sobs.

George was standing not far from him, and looked at him sorrowfully and sympathetically. He could not in the least understand—he had not the faintest comprehension of how a man could become so infatuated with a game of cards; but in spite of this he was sorry for the poor fellow whose pecuniary difficulties were no [Pg 93] secret. For one brief moment he had been rich; now he was poorer than ever, because he had experienced the feeling of possessing money, if only for the time being. It was on the tip of his tongue to go up to his comrade and offer him help; but he had not the courage to put himself forward in this way; he did not wish to risk a snub. And he was quite sure he had acted wisely when Willberg, having recovered his self-possession, got up to go home and went out as if he had not been aware of George's presence. Was he ashamed of his reckless gambling or his tears? He went off without bidding George adieu.

The latter was therefore greatly astonished when next morning Willberg visited him in his rooms. From the first moment he guessed the object of this visit, and his guess became a certainty when he saw his visitor's pale face. After a few casual words of greeting the latter came to the point.

"Last night you were with us, though only as a spectator, so you know that I lost all my winnings, but I also lost another thousand which I had just received, in order to pay some pressing accounts. I have tried to borrow the money from one of my friends, but the Uhlan has cleaned them all out in the same way, so that not one of them to-day has as much as a thousand that he can call his own. Even our chief is [Pg 94] going about with empty pockets. So I have come to you to ask if you can lend me this. I must tell you, quite openly and straightforwardly, that I cannot name the exact day when I can return you the money, but I will do so as soon as ever I can, I give you my word."

"But, please, I really do not require that."

George had risen, and went to his desk to get a note, which he handed to his companion.

The latter shook George's hand gratefully. "You have done me a great service." And after a slight pause, he continued, with unmistakable embarrassment, "I have just one more request: I may rely on your not telling anyone that I have borrowed from you?"

"How could I do such a thing?" asked George, astonished.

But the other did not appear perfectly satisfied with this answer. "Don't take it amiss, but I beg you to give me your word that you will not tell anyone of my visit to you?"

George looked at him with intense astonishment. How could Willberg ask such a thing? However he said: "If it is any satisfaction to you, I will certainly give you my word, though I cannot see any reason for it."

Willberg breathed more freely and took leave, after thanking George most warmly.

[Pg 95]

CHAPTER V

Hildegarde and George

Several weeks passed and George was still "sent to Coventry by the regiment," as he called it. He still had not a single friend with whom he had any close relations. His hope that Willberg, whom he had helped out of his difficulty, would get on more friendly terms with him, was not fulfilled. On the contrary, the latter had less to do with him than usual, although he had not yet paid his debt. George did not trouble about this. He had already had many disagreeable experiences in these matters in his old regiment; but as he himself had grown up in quite different circumstances, he did not really grasp the attitude of the "Golden Butterflies" with regard to money. They had no hesitation, even in the presence of the orderlies, in borrowing from each other. Very often, indeed, they made no scruples about saying to their servants: "Spend this or that amount on my behalf," but the money was not always returned to [Pg 96] the orderly the same day. They got credit wherever they could, and borrowed from all possible sources. In the chief restaurant, where they often passed the evenings rather than stay at home in barracks, many of the officers owed the waiter fifty or sixty marks actually in cash, besides what they owed for food and drinks. And it was just those who owed the waiter most, who lived most extravagantly, ate the dearest food and drank the most expensive wine, and when they went off it was always, "Muller, put down twenty marks to my account, you know you'll get it all right." But the question was, when? Some of the officers had owed this money for months, and they never thought of paying back; so long as they wore a uniform, surely the money was safe enough. George noticed with astonishment that the officers in Berlin were just as lax in these matters as they had been in his former regiment. Once in the little garrison town, in a restaurant much frequented by the military, there was a row with the landlord; the officers boycotted the place and swore that the fellow shouldn't get another penny from them. But not a single one of them thought of paying his debts, part of which were due to the landlord, part to the waiter. It was only when the landlord complained to the colonel that he obtained redress, but even then it was in a curious manner. The colonel did not order his officers to pay their debts within [Pg 97] twenty-four hours, but he gave them six weeks in which to discharge their liabilities. And so the landlord and the waiter, who really needed their money, had to wait patiently all that time.

George remembered another incident that had taken place only a few weeks ago. One morning a senior lieutenant had appeared at lunch much excited, and said that the hairdresser to whom they all went had written and dunned him on account of a miserable debt of a few pounds, and had threatened him with a summons through the post, as he was in great difficulties and wanted his money at once. The officer openly admitted that he had had the hairdresser's bill several times, but had never paid him a penny. But, in spite of this, there was a storm of indignation at the hairdresser's daring to write to him. Why should the fellow want his money in such a hurry? Couldn't he wait? The few pounds were quite safe, and nobody ever sends a man of position a summons through the post. The end of the story was that the "Golden Butterflies" were forbidden to patronise the hairdresser's shop, but, in spite of this, the officers who owed money there did not discharge their debt.

Certainly in all matters connected with money they had few scruples and lax views. Debts were only considered as such when they consisted of actual money; they [Pg 98] never reckoned in what was owing to a tradesman. The fellow was there, of course, to give credit; he had to wait two or three years, sometimes much longer, before getting his money. He ought to be delighted if the officers came into his shop, and ought to be willing to pay something for the honour of having such customers, and getting a good advertisement. They got credit everywhere, and once it happened that a lieutenant owed his own servant twenty marks. The incident was revealed when the recruits were dismissed. The colonel when discharging the recruits said: "Has any one of you any claims on the regiment? if so, let him make it now." Then a young recruit stepped forward and said in a loud voice: "I am still owed twenty marks by my former lieutenant, which he borrowed from me a few months ago when I had some money from home." The matter was investigated, and found to be quite correct; the fellow was paid his money and the lieutenant received a severe rebuke. But everyone thought it was an unheard-of thing for a discharged soldier to bring a complaint against his former lieutenant. Nobody, however, asked if the man were in a position to bear the loss of twenty marks.

George remained completely isolated among his companions. Nobody troubled in the least about him. His astonishment therefore was all the greater when one day [Pg 99] after lunch his adjutant sat down beside him, and engaged him in a long and very friendly conversation. He could not quite account for this mark of distinction, but he quickly understood when Count Wettborn suddenly said to him: "I have for a long time meant to ask you why your father does not try to get a title. The thing is certainly not easy, but your father is well thought of by His Majesty, and it would be easy to overcome the difficulty if your father would be disposed to give a couple of hundred thousand marks for some charitable object. Your father could certainly do that—why doesn't he?"

"Because my father is proud of his own name, which he has made an honourable one."

The count rubbed his feet with some embarrassment, then he said: "Of course, your father is quite right as far as he himself is concerned, but he ought to think of you. You would take quite a different position in Society if you were a baron or a count. The world lays great stress on this, and in my opinion it is quite right. For you, especially, now that you belong to a distinguished regiment, a title would be of the greatest value."

The count talked to George for a long time, and the latter saw clearly that the adjutant in saying all he did was not following a sudden impulse, but was acting on [Pg 100] mature reflection, and had evidently consulted the wish of the colonel or one or other of the military authorities. George felt the blood mount to his cheeks. He felt ashamed that his companion had the audacity to talk to him in this way. Good heavens! was a title then, which could be bought for a few hundred thousands, really of much more importance to these aristocratic lieutenants, who were ciphers when they got out of their uniforms, than a good, old, simple middle-class name which was honoured and respected by the whole commercial world?

He could not help saying in reply to the adjutant: "My father has often enough been offered a peerage, but every time he has refused it."

"I cannot understand such a thing." The count stuck his eyeglass in more firmly and looked at George with speechless astonishment. "I really cannot understand it," he repeated, and George saw that he spoke in bitter earnest. He really *could* not understand how a man could refuse a title, simply because he was proud of his own plain name.

For a long while the adjutant sat silent, then he finished the conversation with the remark: "Well, perhaps you will write to your father again about this matter, or, better still, perhaps you will talk to him. You may be able to change his mind."

[Pg 101] George did not answer, but he knew how his father always laughed at the people who directly they had made money had no other ambition in life but to get a title. He felt that the words which the adjutant had just addressed to him were almost an insult, and yet when he considered them quietly, he could not altogether take umbrage at them. He saw every day of his life how the aristocracy had the preference in everything; how even in these enlightened days a title possessed many advantages, and that it was given to men of wealth as a distinction and an honour. And even in the army was not a title of advantage to a man? If three officers, one of whom had a title, went in for a post, was not the aristocrat always chosen, and if by the rarest chance a middle-class man was ever successful in such a case, was he not at once ennobled? The position of an officer is only suited for a man with a title. The old adage was very suitable for present days—the plebeian in the army who did not distinguish himself in some extremely remarkable manner would never get promotion as soon as the most ordinary commonplace titled officer.

And was it any different in Society? George had now been to quite enough social entertainments to know how everyone bowed down to a title; how even the youngest aristocratic lieutenant was considered superior to a staff-officer of plebeian birth. [Pg 102] And how often had he not noticed how people hummed and hawed at the sight of him, and could not understand how it was he belonged to such a distinguished regiment. Although the words had been softly spoken he had once heard a young girl at a ball whisper to a friend: "If Lieutenant Winkler asks me to dance, I shall say my programme is full; I shall certainly not dance with a middle-class officer."

All the women regarded him as an outsider. A bare nod was their only greeting, even the one or two who shook hands with him did this without breaking off their conversation, and with an expression which showed they thought they were doing him a great favour. But he was just as much isolated in the army as in Society; his comrades chattered and laughed with the ladies, had all kinds of little intrigues with them, made engagements with them, while he wandered about alone and bored. He was an "outsider," and nobody troubled to introduce him.

The only person who was always pleasant to him was Hildegarde. They had often come across one another, and a sincere friendship had sprung up between them. The two "outcasts" Hildegarde called himself and her to her relatives. George was never introduced, and she herself occupied a curious position in Society. She was no longer quite a young girl, and interest in her charms had vanished. People invited her out, it [Pg 103] is true, but that was largely because they could not do anything else, but privately they always hoped she would not accept the invitation. When she did go to parties, contemptuous remarks were made behind her back. Hildegarde acted as if she were quite unconscious of them, but she understood the glances that were directed towards her, and even when she did not actually hear the words, she knew very well how the people shook their heads over her and whispered to each other. It was a great effort of self-control to go to these entertainments, and after every party she said to herself: "To-day is the very last time I will go; to-morrow I shall go home."

But the terrible anxiety which always reigned in her home kept her at her aunt's. "I would rather endure these secret remarks than see the poverty and misery at home, and bear their reproaches." At intervals she confessed to herself that she stayed on George's account; not that she could say she was exactly in love with him. The question of marriage had been so much and so often talked about, that love seemed a ridiculous thing, and it all depended on whether the man had money or not. The holiest of feelings had been so unreservedly discussed in her presence that she believed that her heart was no longer accessible to love. In George she saw a reliable [Pg 104] friend. He was always very attentive to her; as soon as he saw her by herself he came to her side, and she felt his glance continually on her. His glance seemed to say: "I do not know, of course, what anxiety is troubling you, but I know that you are feeling sad and lonely here, just as I am, and I want, therefore, to do what I can for you."

This evening she was to meet him again. There was a great reception at the American ambassador's, and she was delighted at the prospect of seeing him. She had dressed herself specially well for his benefit, and had put on a new costume which her aunt had just given her. In pleasant anticipation of the entertainment she had begun to dress sooner than usual, and now a quarter of an hour before it was time to go she was standing in front of the looking-glass and regarding herself smilingly. She was pleased with her own beauty, and knew that to-day, at any rate, she would once again arouse admiration.

She was standing deep in thought when a knock at the door aroused her. "Is it time yet? I am quite ready. I'll come at once."

"Madam has plenty of time. The carriage is not yet at the door, but there is an express message for you."

Hildegarde was alarmed. An express letter for her! Whatever could have happened?

She opened the door and took the letter from the girl, and she shuddered involuntarily when she recognised her brother's handwriting.

[Pg 105] "Oh, dear!" She threw the letter on the table with annoyance. Without opening she knew perfectly well that it contained a request for money. A feeling of repugnance came over her. "Why should he spoil my pleasure just at this moment? How can I possibly ask my aunt for anything when she has just given me this costly dress?" All her pleasure had vanished. "Well," she said to herself at last, "the letter shall not spoil my temper to-day. I shall read it to-morrow, or this evening, when I get back again."

An inward feeling of anxiety, however, caused her to tear open the envelope, and she read:

> "Dear little Hildegarde,—You know the old story how the watchman summoned a woman out of bed and called out to her: 'Mrs. Meyer, you are going to have a terrible shock; your husband is dead.' Well, I say to you now, dear Hildegarde, don't be frightened, but I must have four thousand marks. The deuce take it, but I haven't had a bit of luck lately. Yesterday morning I had a whole heap of dunning letters. I didn't know myself where all the people came from who suddenly demanded money. Where on earth am I to get it from without stealing it? So I tried my luck at cards, but the luck was against me, and when I woke up this morning with a splitting headache I found I had lost [Pg 106] four thousand marks. Thank heaven I have three days' respite, but then I must settle the affair, or nothing else remains but to put the necessary bullet through my head. You know that other debts don't worry me, but gambling debts are debts of honour, and there must be no fleck on our honour. Rather than this, we must make our exit from this world. Better die than be dishonoured. So, dear Hilda, I must have four brown bits of paper, and you must manage to get them for me. I ask you this with much less reluctance than usual, because I hear with the greatest joy that you are just about to be engaged. Well, it's high time, Hilda, both for you and for us. Don't disappoint us again. You have gone off considerably during the last year or so. When I saw you last I had quite a shock. Don't misunderstand me. You are still, of course, a very pretty girl, but nothing compared with what you were. Well, the main thing now is for you to capture this Winkler or whatever he's called. What sort of a man is he? Aunt writes to mother that he pays you the very greatest attention. You can imagine how beside themselves with joy they are at home. Father wrote to me that in honour of the welcome news he had immediately completed his wine cellar, and like a chivalrous gentleman he drank your health in French champagne. He can't stand that German stuff any longer.

[Pg 107]

Father suffers frightfully from indigestion, you know. Aunt tells us also that your future father-in-law manufactures buttons. It's a frightful idea, but is it really true? However, the main thing is that he manufactures enough of them! Keep him tight! You have fine eyes, use them well and you'll secure him. And when you are once engaged, which it is to be hoped will be within the next few days, then hurry on the marriage, so that he may not have time for regrets, and before he learns how we are reckoning on his money. When he's once my brother-in-law I'll manage to extract the ducats from him. I don't feel in the least anxious about *that*!

"Well, Hilda, I've written enough for to-day. I have to go on duty, the colonel has just summoned a meeting of officers to read out to us again the most stringent regulations concerning Courts of Honour. Isn't it ridiculous nonsense! As if one didn't know how to behave as an honourable gentleman indeed! If a man doesn't *feel* these things he doesn't learn them by yawning more or less loudly while these endless regulations are read out to him.

"Send me, please, the four thousand marks; uncle will give it you at once if you tell him it will be paid back directly after your marriage. Let me impress [Pg 108] this upon you: have your marriage contract drawn up at a lawyer's, and mind you have a good income settled upon you. In your place, I wouldn't accept less than forty thousand marks a year. The fellow must expect to pay something for marrying into such a distinguished family. However, I must tell you that, in spite of the French champagne which father was only able to get on credit on the strength of your approaching marriage, things at home are in a frightful condition. Father wrote and asked me to send him a few thousand, or at least a few hundred marks if I won at cards. Ah, if the old gentleman had an idea of the terrible hole I am in! Now, dear Hilda, arrange your affairs satisfactorily. With love and kisses.—Your affectionate brother,

"Fritz."

Every drop of blood vanished from Hildegarde's face as she read the letter. She stood motionless, and a feeling of repugnance came over her, as it often did when she had news from home. She tore the letter into a thousand pieces and stamped them under foot.

Then she sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. "They ought to be ashamed of writing to me in this way," she moaned. "Just imagine their regarding me as a chattel that is to be sold to the highest bidder. What is it that Fritz writes?—'He [Pg 109] must expect to pay something if he marries into our distinguished family.' Distinguished family!" and she laughed bitterly. "Bankrupts, gamblers, men with whom nobody would have anything to do if it were not that they owned noble names and wore uniforms. A man has only to wear an officer's uniform and belong to an aristocratic family, and, of course, he is a man of honour."

She roused herself from her meditations when her aunt came in to inquire whether she was dressed, and when she saw Hildegarde's face she clasped her hands in horror.

"But, Hildegarde, whatever is the matter? What has happened?"

Hildegarde shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. "What has happened! You can see by these pieces on the floor. Fritz has been gambling again, he needs four thousand marks. I am to ask you for it." Then suddenly she burst forth with passionate indignation: "Aunt, how could you tell them at home that my engagement with Lieutenant Winkler was about to take place? You ought not to have done such a thing; the consequences have been serious. On the strength of their prospective son-in-law and brother-in-law, both my father and Fritz have contracted all kinds of debts. And I do not really know if Lieutenant Winkler even loves me. I scarcely think so, but if he should get to love me and want to marry me, then I know what I shall do: [Pg 110] I shall open his eyes to everything. When he asks for my hand I shall tell him how I have been sent for years to Berlin in order to get a rich husband; how my relatives reckon on his money, and what they think of his plebeian birth. I shall tell him everything, for even if I do not love Lieutenant Winkler, I honour him and respect him too highly to deceive him. He shall know and understand clearly into what an honourable family he is about to marry. I shall tell him everything!"

"You will do no such thing." Frau von Warnow had listened to Hildegarde, speechless with amazement, and it was quite a long time before she regained her composure. "You will do no such thing," she repeated with anger. "You have not only your duty to your own people, but to us also. I will not remind you of what we have already done for you. It is true we are rich, but, in spite of this, naturally we should not have given you, your parents and your brother, hundreds and hundreds of pounds if we had not taken it for granted that you would have repaid us in some way or other. When you say that you will tell Lieutenant Winkler everything before marriage, you say something that is simply ridiculous. The four thousand marks

[Pg 111] won't matter in the least to him with all his money, and you may be sure he's clever enough to know that a beautiful girl only marries a middle-class lieutenant for his money. If you tell him everything beforehand you warn him, to a certain extent, against marrying you, and then he can't very well help drawing back. And then, what will you do?"

Hildegarde shrugged her beautiful shoulders. "What shall I do? I don't mind in the least. I shouldn't starve. As I told you before, I should get a situation of some kind or other."

Her aunt laughed contemptuously: "You are out of your mind! What do you know, I say? What can you do? Have you any idea of housekeeping, cooking, domestic work? You certainly couldn't get a post as a companion. You are not a good musician, you don't read aloud well, your knowledge of foreign languages is practically *nil*. So how could you earn your living?" She spoke with the bitterest irony, but when she saw the look of despair on Hildegarde's face, sympathy got the better of her, and almost tenderly she put her arm round the girl's neck. "Don't be so sad, it will turn out better than you think. I can quite understand that Fritz's letter has terribly upset you, but he doesn't mean it all. I will talk to your uncle to-day about sending the money. He shall send it, or I will. And now, hold your head high. It is high time for us to go."

"Yes, do go, aunt, but let me stay at home. I am really not in the mood to go to a party."

[Pg 112] "What? Hildegarde,"—her aunt thought she could not have heard rightly—"you want to stay at home? That would never do. Especially to-day when the court has promised to put in an appearance, you must not fail to be there. And do you imagine that I had this costly new costume made for you to take it off and put it in your wardrobe? Whatever answer should I give when people inquired after you?"

A sorrowful little laugh played round Hildegarde's mouth.

"Nobody will ask after me; they will be delighted not to see me."

"And what about Lieutenant Winkler? What am I to say to him when he makes inquiries after you?"

Hildegarde looked at her aunt with wide-open eyes.

"Do you not really understand that it is precisely on his account that I don't want to go to the reception? It would be simply impossible for me to talk to him naturally and pleasantly after Fritz's letter and our conversation." Suddenly, however, she changed her mind: "No, you are quite right. I will not allow the day, to which I have so greatly looked forward, to be spoiled."

Her aunt embraced her tenderly:

"That is quite right, my child. Come along now, the carriage is at the door."

[Pg 113] They drove immediately to the embassy. They were somewhat late, rows and rows of carriages were drawn up before the gates, and it was long before their carriage could drive in. Herr and Frau von Warnow conversed about the occupants of the other carriages, which were close by them, exchanged remarks concerning the elegance of their various acquaintances, and passed the time in wondering which of the royalties would put in an appearance to-day. Hildegarde sat silent in her corner. In answer to her uncle she had pleaded a headache, and Frau von Warnow had given her husband a sign not to pursue the matter. So she could remain undisturbed in her thoughts. What had really made her change her mind and go to the reception? A sudden desire had sprung up in her to meet George, to see and converse with an honourable man. She did not exactly know how she was to do it, but she had made up her mind to stick to her resolution and to say to him: "Pay your court to some one who is worthier of you than I am." Before she would accept any more attentions from him she wanted to tell him about her father and brother. If then he continued to treat her with peculiar chivalry, and to endeavour to win her hand, her conscience would be quite free, and she could look him in the face honestly and straightforwardly.

"Aren't you ever going to get out, Hildegarde?"

[Pg 114] Hildegarde got out. She had sat in her corner with closed eyes, and did not notice that the footman had been holding open the door for a long time. She followed the others, and a quarter of an hour later she walked into the enormous reception-rooms in which a brilliant company was assembled. There were endless greetings and hand-shakings, endless inquiries after health and the events of the last few days. Everybody was constantly looking with expectation towards the door, for the court party was momentarily expected. Although no one, of course, would have confessed it, all were consumed with anxiety to see whether His Majesty would notice and talk to them, and distinguish them by shaking hands. Each one hoped that he would enjoy this distinction. Nobody wanted the other to have it, and each hoped, in secret, that he alone would be noticed by the Emperor.

George was standing by Hildegarde's side. She noticed how he had sought her out, though she had hoped to avoid him, but her tall figure prevented him from losing sight of her. She feigned, however, to be astonished when he suddenly said: "How do you do?" to her, but she read in his eyes that he had seen through her little ruse, and without further preamble he said to her: "Are you vexed with me for any reason, baroness?"

[Pg 115] She looked at him frankly and honestly. "No, certainly not."

His face lit up. "That's all right, then." After a slight pause he said: "You avoided me. Is it at all disagreeable to you for me to be by your side?"

Again she cast a frank look at him. "Not at all," and then somewhat hesitatingly she added: "Will you be so kind as to take me in to supper this evening?" She really meant to say: "I want to talk to you," but she could not get out the words.

He bowed gratefully. "If we should lose sight of each other in this crowd, baroness, let us meet again at this place, if it is agreeable to you."

She nodded agreement, and stepped back a little, for at this moment the royal party was announced. A mysterious stillness reigned, the stir of voices was hushed; everyone looked at His Majesty, who had come into the room, and smiling graciously, walked down the long row of bowed figures. Here and there he stopped and exchanged a friendly word or handshake, and everybody who enjoyed this distinction was almost annihilated by his neighbours' envious glances.

Suddenly His Majesty stopped in front of George and graciously extended his [Pg 116] hand. "Ah, you are here, dear Winkler. How are you? To-day I received a very interesting report from your father. I must have a talk with him as soon as possible, and then you must come with your father and dine with me."

George bent his head to kiss his sovereign's hand, and as he did so, the Emperor noticed Hildegarde, and greeted her with a friendly smile. "Are you still turning the heads of all my lieutenants, baroness?" he asked playfully; "though that is easy enough when one is as beautiful as you are." And with a laughing glance he passed on.

In the stillness that reigned, His Majesty's words had been heard by the whole room, and now all eyes were turned on Hildegarde and George, who were naturally delighted at the honour that had fallen to them, although they were a little embarrassed at the harmless badinage. They stood there silently, and were glad when the people began to talk and walk about again. They did not see each other again till midnight, when supper was announced. As usual, it was set out on small tables, and George was fortunate in finding one at which the guests were unknown to him, and so he could talk undisturbed to Hildegarde. However, they were temporarily the objects of their companions' notice, and some of the ladies spoke freely about the remarks which the Emperor had made about Hildegarde. Indeed [Pg 117] one, a haggard, tall woman, examined Hildegarde most impertinently through her lorgnette, and then said half aloud: "Well, I can't understand why His Majesty should think her so good-looking."

Hildegarde threw a perfectly frank glance at the speaker and laughed aloud, then she turned to George and said: "I cannot tell you how delighted I am at the words the Emperor addressed to you. I am firmly convinced you will now at once take your right position both in Society and in the regiment, which before you were unable to do."

George shrugged his shoulders. "I scarcely think so, baroness. I fear these gracious words will have done me more harm than good. People will grudge both me and my father praise from so exalted a quarter. However, I am not going to let that spoil my pleasure in the public recognition of my father. Do me the honour of drinking to his health."

"With the greatest of pleasure," and the glasses clicked.

"I want you to know my father, baroness," George went on: "you would like him, though naturally most of the people here would not. They would never pardon him for not wearing well-starched cuffs, and for not tying his cravat in the proper manner. I think, however, you would like him. Perhaps the next time he comes to [Pg 118] Berlin I might introduce him to you? He is bringing my sister with him, and, as I have so often told her about you in my letters, she is most anxious to make your acquaintance."

Hildegarde was somewhat embarrassed at these words. Then he had also told his people about her, perhaps even he had confessed that he meant to win her hand. The remembrance of her brother's letter came back to her. She must tell him all before it was too late. How was she to do it? Nobody was paying any attention to their conversation, but how was she to express what she wanted to say? As he had not told her what his intentions were, she could not very well say to him: "Don't think of wooing; on account of my family I will not and cannot be your wife." And yet if without further explanations she spoke about their poverty at home, might it not occur to him that perhaps she expected help from him or his father. She could find no way out of the difficulty. Then she wondered why he had never spoken to her about his sister. She was much astonished, and at last she said: "Have you a sister, then, Lieutenant Winkler? Why did you never tell me about her?"

He looked at her surprised: "What! did I never tell you about her? You mustn't take that amiss, for I had no intention of not talking about her to you."

[Pg 119] "And why should you not talk about her to other people?" she inquired, with some curiosity.

George was embarrassed, and blushed like a child. "I can't exactly explain it. Perhaps it is that when one loves anybody very much one does not speak much about them to anyone. And even if I had wanted to talk about her, to whom should I have talked? In the regiment no one takes the faintest interest in me, far less in my family, and naturally, I don't talk about such matters unless I am asked." Then, after a slight pause, he continued: "And there's another reason why I don't care to talk about Elsa."

"And what is that?" Hildegarde asked, as he was silent.

"I don't know how to express in words exactly what I want to say. I don't want to appear suspicious of my comrades, neither do I wish to represent myself as a model of virtue, which, indeed, I am not, and could not be, at twenty-seven years old. But I can't help saying that at mess my fellow-officers have a way of talking about young girls, whom they meet in Society, which is simply revolting to me. No, not revolting, that's too strong," he corrected himself. "I am simply astounded, and constantly say to myself: 'Haven't these officers sisters, and haven't their mothers taught them any [Pg 120] respect and reverence for women; so that they don't treat all alike?' In my old regiment it was quite different; we were not perhaps more moral men, but in the little town where we were brought into such close relationship with the few families, we could not criticise the young girls so freely and so shamelessly. I remember how once at dinner an officer went so far as to make an insulting remark about one of the ladies. The orderlies were sent out of the room, and the oldest officer at the table, an old captain, read the young lieutenant such a lecture before us all, that he never said a single word in excuse."

"That is as it ought to be," said Hildegarde.

"Certainly," George agreed, "that is why I am astonished that our officers don't feel like that. If only the girls, who so often regard a lieutenant as the paragon of perfection, knew, or could hear with their own ears how the officers talk about them after they have been to an entertainment, they would blush with shame, and a lieutenant would soon cease to be their ideal. There are, of course, exceptions, thank God! but most of my fellow-officers are as I have just described, and it is the same in other regiments; to them a woman is just like a horse—a thing to be examined and appraised. How is it, I wonder, that a young girl is of so little account to a lieutenant, that he talks of her without the least respect? I have often thought over the matter. Is [Pg 121] it, perhaps due to their education? Most of them grow up in the regiment; they have no home life; they only see their sisters and their friends when on leave; as cadets, they go into Society to make conquests, and each conquest helps to lower all young girls in their eyes. Perhaps the girls themselves are to a certain extent answerable for this state of affairs. In Society there exists no one but a lieutenant for them, they ignore a civilian, unless he happens to be a reserve officer. The lieutenant simply goes about in pursuit of conquest, and often he wins the victory only too easily. I cannot speak of this from my own experience. I am a stranger here, but I have often heard my comrades talk of young girls who push themselves forward, send them love-letters, and who do not even wait until they are asked to give a rendezvous, but ask permission to be allowed to visit the officers, either in a friend's house, or in the officers' quarters."

"But, Lieutenant Winkler," interrupted Hildegarde, "no lady would do such a thing."

"She certainly ought not to do so," he agreed, "but, nevertheless, she does. Just give a glance at the select company here. How many of these aristocratic ladies have not a more or less harmless intrigue with a lieutenant? It is not only the married [Pg 122] ladies, I can assure you. Those young girls trip about so modestly and chastely, yet their great pride is that, in spite of their youth, they have had a *past*."

Hildegarde knew only too well that he was right. She remembered how most of the friends of her youth had had a lieutenant lover. How often had she not spoken to them about this, and reproached them, but all had given the same answer: "Why shouldn't I have a lover? the others have, and what's the use of being young and beautiful? Do you think that our blood remains calm when a man pays court to us the whole evening, presses us closely to him when dancing, and casts longing glances at us? Are we to wait till we have a husband? We may wait a long time, perhaps for ever, and what then? Do you want us to die without having had experience of life? How ridiculous!"

They told one another with truly cynical frankness how they managed to deceive their parents and prevent any consequence of their intrigues. Perhaps Hildegarde was naturally too cold and too lacking in passion to understand her friends. Above all, she could not understand the officers who, more than all others, ought to be regarded as honourable men, and who yet made no scruples of entering into a *liaison* with the wife or daughter of the house where they enjoyed the pleasantest social relations.

[Pg 123] Hildegarde and George sat for a long time occupied with their own thoughts. George misinterpreted Hildegarde's silence. He thought she was perhaps vexed with his remarks, and so he said:

"I hope you are not angry with me for having spoken so freely and frankly in your presence; but we have both of us been brought up among quite different circumstances and educated in quite different views."

Hildegarde felt that she blushed. Grown up among different circumstances indeed! It was entirely her own merit that she did not resemble her companions. Perhaps, however, it was partly due to her father and brother who had constantly written to her: "Don't throw yourself away, and don't enter into a *liaison* if you are not sure that it will lead to marriage. You will get nothing out of it, and then you lower your value and utterly destroy the hopes we set upon you."

How often had she not wondered whether her brother would have been quite inconsolable if she had written to him: "I have not found a husband but a friend. If you will pardon this, I will pay your debts."

She did not doubt that he would accept the money in order to remain an officer and play the fêted and envied rôle in Society of a soldier.

"Are you angry with me?" George asked, as Hildegarde still remained silent.

[Pg 124] She roused herself from her thoughts. "Why should I be?" And in order to turn the conversation, which was painful to her, to another subject, she again inquired about his sister. And then George told her all about his sister—how charming and beautiful she was, how kindly and good, how they had grown up together as excellent friends, and how often they had fought each other's battles when they were children. He told his stories gaily, with sparkling eyes, and Hildegarde listened with interest.

"Do you know, I envy you your sister, or rather the pleasant relation in which you stand to her. Sisterly love is such a beautiful thing."

"Yes, certainly; but you are also in that happy situation. You have a brother."

"Please do not speak to me about him."

There was such a tone of contempt and depreciation in her words that he looked at her with astonishment.

"But, baroness, he is your brother."

"You do not know him. Please let us change the subject."

"Certainly, if you wish it."

In his embarrassment George emptied his glass and vainly thought of another topic, and both were glad when at last everybody rose from the table.

The ball went on till the small hours of the morning, and during the dancing
[Pg 125] George never lost sight of Hildegarde. He had the pleasure of being able to introduce some fresh officers and partners; and he was really more delighted than she was at the admiration she evoked.

It was late when at last the ball broke up. George, at the last moment, was unable to say farewell to Hildegarde, and he walked home with a companion in a somewhat bad humour.

His companion was apparently occupied with some thoughts that interested him. Suddenly he stood still and seized George by the arm. "What will you bet that he wins her? That would be much better than a lucky stroke at cards."

George regarded his comrade with astonishment. "I don't understand what you mean. Whom are you speaking about?"

The other went on walking again. "Oh, yes, of course, you don't know Gastion of the Hussars. My gracious, he has paid court to Fräulein von Reisinger this evening! Well, she is no longer very young, and she never was pretty, but her family is a very old Jewish one. I believe her mother was a Moses, but that doesn't matter. She has money; a frightful amount of money. If Gastion gets that, he can live in fine style. But he certainly needs it; he is said to be two hundred thousand marks in debt."

[Pg 126] George had listened without apparently much interest. Then he said: "Is it not really frightful that we officers—present company, of course, excepted—when we choose a wife, make it a matter of convenience? We live luxuriously, we fling away our money and our health, and when one day we are at the end of our tether, we look out at balls and parties for a rich young girl who will put things right for us again. The more money she has the more, of course, we run after her. How few marry on their pay!"

"Well, of course, that's ridiculous; who can live on a few pence."

"I quite agree with you, though many people manage to do so. But still is it not a very interesting psychological fact that almost every officer falls in love with a girl who is rich and ugly? Yet no one of course ever admits that he has married for money. It is indeed insulting and libellous to suggest such a thing. On the contrary, everyone pretends that in spite of his wife's lack of beauty and more or less unpleasing characteristics, he really loves her. If she had no money he would of course not look at her. To speak quite frankly, I cannot in the least understand how rich parents can give their daughter to an officer. People must know that officers only accept their daughters because of the money, and I cannot imagine how the girls themselves can be so foolish as to suppose they are married for love."

[Pg 127] "Excuse me," put in his companion, "you are expressing very curious views. According to you, then, young girls who are rich ought not to marry at all."

"I beg your pardon, I do not say that, but they ought to marry whom they like, only not lieutenants, who, in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of one thousand would not dream of marrying if they were not up to their ears in debt."

"It is all very well for you to talk," said the other. "It is easy you know for a man who is born into the world a millionaire to judge a poor devil severely. What you say is all very beautiful and noble in theory, but what about practice? When I can, I prefer to ride in my own carriage, rather than the electric tram. Ah, here our ways separate, you go to the right, I to the left. What time do you go on duty to-morrow?"

"Not at all in the morning."

"Lucky fellow, I must be on parade at seven. Good-night."

After a cool handshake the comrades separated and a little later George reached his rooms.

[Pg 128]

CHAPTER VI

Military Morals

It had all turned out just as George had foretold; the kindly words which His Majesty had addressed to him at the American Embassy and the warm praise of his father, had not contributed towards improving his position in the regiment; on the contrary, it had made it worse. Scarcely a day passed but some one or other in George's absence talked about him and discussed the Emperor's remarks. Whatever had made the Emperor specially distinguish him, the only plebeian officer of the regiment? Even the colonel had had to be content with a mere handshake, the staff officers, not to mention the others, had scarcely received a glance; George alone had been addressed. Was it mere chance or was it really the report of the button manufacturer—as Old Winkler was always called for shortness—that had occasioned the remarks? And what on earth could such a manufacturer tell His Majesty which he did not know [Pg 129] already? Old Winkler indeed was said to be unique in his arrangements for the benefits of his workpeople and in his efforts for their welfare, and he had discovered new methods and means of ameliorating their existence. Of course, everybody knew that His Majesty was deeply interested in the condition of the working classes, but in spite of this, they thought this public praise of Old Winkler somewhat ostentatious and superfluous, if an officer—and therefore a loyal subject—might venture to criticise His Majesty's words. Or had the Emperor's words any particular significance? The Emperor knew, of course, what was thought about George in the regiment, how he was still an "outsider," and would always remain one. Had His Majesty's words meant—"You need not trouble yourselves, you will not get rid of Lieutenant Winkler, he has a powerful protector in me." Had he perhaps wanted to encourage George by his gracious words to persevere and not to despair even if he had not succeeded in winning a good position in the regiment?

Not a single "Golden Butterfly" had ever been commanded to attend at Court, except on the occasion of some great entertainment; then the regiment had appeared as a whole, and even this distinction had made them feel very proud. And now George was publicly invited by the Emperor to come with his father to dine at Court. [Pg 130] It was well known that His Majesty frequently gave little parties where everybody was quite unconstrained, and there was much lively conversation. The Emperor surprised everyone by the astonishing amount of his knowledge and fascinated all by his great personal attractions. Why should George be invited to share in these intimate little parties? Simply because he was the son of his father. And who indeed was his father? He was merely a middle-class button manufacturer, and he would remain that, even if he were wiser and more important than all the other wise men put together.

They would not have grudged any of their other companions the honour which had been paid to George. They would have regarded it as an honour paid to the aristocratic classes to which they themselves belonged. They grudged it George because they said to themselves: "If nowadays the middle-class is to be honoured in this way, what is there then for the nobility, who have done, and will do more, for Germany than manufacture trouser-buttons, which certainly have the advantage of being durable and cheap."

Up till the present the officers had not troubled to take any notice of George. Now they turned their attention to him, and although he was always quiet and modest in his behaviour to his companions, and yet dignified without being proud, they became [Pg 131] even haughtier than they had formerly been. More than ever they were the aristocrats; more than ever they endeavoured to show him what a great and impassable barrier divided him from them. Their behaviour indicated as clearly as words: "We intend to get rid of him; one day he himself will perceive that he cannot possibly remain with us any longer."

George was perfectly well aware of the feeling that existed against him, and even if he had wanted to deceive himself in this matter, one thing would have opened his eyes to this fact. This was the condescending manner in which young Willberg regularly every week, purely as a matter of form, made his excuses for not having been able to return the £50 which he had been obliging enough to lend him.

"I really do not want the money," George said every time; "on the contrary, I live so economically that I save money. I would gladly lend you a larger amount, and you need not hurry about paying it back."

George noticed how very gladly young Willberg accepted the generously-offered help, for it was an open secret that he would not be able to go on much longer. Nobody knew exactly how he stood with regard to money matters. He did not gamble more than the others, but he had other expenses. In the eyes of young girls in [Pg 132] Society, he enjoyed much distinction in consequence of his *amours*. He knew how interesting he was to them, because he had the reputation of not being able to be faithful to anyone. And he knew equally well that in spite of this reputation, or rather just because of it, he would have no difficulty in winning a rich wife one day. The bride would be envied for having a *fiancé* with such an interesting past; they would consider her lucky to have caught him. He intended to marry later, but his wife must have money, a great deal of money, for he had no intention of changing his mode of life when he was a married man. Willberg had no idea of the value of money, and whenever he was able to borrow a few pounds from a relative he could not rest until he had spent it. He was continually in debt, and just now things were very bad with him. He was always complaining of his wretched position, and drank more wine than usual to drown his cares. He owed money all round the regiment, and George foresaw that it would not be long before young Willberg would again borrow from him without being able to discharge his former debt. And the moment came sooner than even George had imagined.

George had gone home one day from the mess-room earlier than usual. He had received a letter from his friend Olga, a young actress at the Residenz Theatre, [Pg 133] saying that she would come to supper with him. At first he had thought of putting her off, as he had some important work to do, but finally he had telegraphed to her: "Come, I am expecting you." He had not the heart to spoil her evening. She was so fond of him, and so happy in his comfortable and beautifully-furnished rooms. There was nothing more delightful to her than to admire his beautiful things and rummage in his library.

Soon they were sitting in the little dining-room, opposite each other at the charmingly decorated table, and George observed laughingly how she enjoyed the oysters and Pommery.

"It is all very well for you to laugh. You have just come from dinner, but I have eaten nothing since three o'clock."

"My dear child, go on eating. I am only too delighted if it is to your taste, and the more you eat the better pleased I am. And when you have finished these oysters here, there is another dozen outside on ice, and after that there is your favourite dish—stuffed artichokes."

She clapped her hands with pleasure like a child; then she looked at him gratefully with her wide-open, dark brown eyes, and softly stroked his hand. "How good and kind you are to me."

"Really, Olga!" He was almost embarrassed by the feeling in her voice, and attempted to joke: "Don't make fun of me, Olga. If the whole extent of my kindness to [Pg 134] you consists in my telling my landlady to cook your favourite dishes, it is really not very much." And after a slight pause, he added: "I am very fond of you, little Olga."

She looked at him delighted. "Do you really mean it?" And when he bowed and drank her health, she said: "Do you know, I believe you. Indeed when I am with you I know that you are fond of me."

Suddenly she jumped up, clung to him, and kissed him passionately.

"But, Olga, my dear girl, your oysters will be getting cold," he said at last, as she went on caressing him.

Laughingly she stopped and sat down again.

Olga was a picturesque looking girl of medium height, faultless figure, a bright intelligent face, wonderful brown eyes and a charming little nose. Everything about her was *petite*. She had small hands that were most carefully attended to, and ravishing little feet. Her whole expression and bearing was sympathetic in the highest degree. Without being exactly clever she was amusing and bright. One could talk to her for hours together without suffering a moment's boredom; she could tell amusing stories and was always ready to see a joke. She laughed so heartily that the tears came into her eyes, and when she laughed she always showed her dazzling [Pg 135] white teeth. One thing about her was especially attractive to George, she was a thoroughly straightforward creature. She was always good-tempered and amiable, never capricious or extravagant. Only once had she ever expressed a wish to George. For days he had noticed that something worried her; he urged her constantly to tell him, and at last she did so.

"But, first of all, you must put out the gas, otherwise I shall be so terribly ashamed; you mustn't look at me when I tell you."

Laughingly he had agreed to her wish, and then she had confessed: "I want a little gold watch tremendously."

And when he remained speechless with astonishment at her modesty, she went on: "Don't be angry with me, I saw a perfectly lovely watch in a shop window for a hundred marks, but if that is too much, a cheaper one will do perfectly well."

When he had carried out her desire, and bought her a costly watch and a gold chain, she had sat the whole evening with him without taking any interest in him, but playing with her watch, alternately laughing and crying for joy. At the beginning of their acquaintanceship she could not be induced to accept anything from him; for days he had argued with her, and only at last did she allow him to make her an allowance when he declared in the most emphatic manner that otherwise he would [Pg 136] have nothing further to do with her. He paid for her rooms and everything she required without pampering her. For his own sake he took care that things were all right for her, and without her knowing it he regularly put £10 in the bank for her every week. "Then at least she need not throw herself into the arms of the first best man whenever we separate," he said to himself.

He had been to the bank on her account this very day, and on his way back he had bought a pretty little brooch, which he just remembered. "Good gracious, Olga, I quite forgot something. Look, here's a little trifle for you."

He got up and fetched the jewel-case, and enjoyed the delighted look that she cast upon the ornament.

"George, you really ought not to give me such presents."

"Oh, that's all right, I never give more than I can afford, and, like all my presents, it is paid for."

She thanked him once more, then she said: "Do you know, I am really to be envied for knowing you? Don't misunderstand me, you know perfectly well that I want nothing from you and ask nothing of you. Once I know I asked you for a watch, and I am heartily ashamed of it, and if I had ever imagined that you would have spent so [Pg 137] much over it I would never have mentioned it, for I would not have you imagine for a moment that I care for you because you are rich."

"But, Olga, I know all that, you have no need to tell me. You were going to tell me, however, why you are to be envied because we are friends."

"Because you are an honourable man, because—well, how can I tell you. You see all my friends at the theatre have a patron and protector. But what sort of men are they? Men of the world in the worst sense of the word, who bluster and bully, contract debt after debt, and if they give a present it is not paid for; everything they give is borrowed, and that destroys all pleasure in receiving the gift. But everything connected with you is so high-class, straightforward, solid. Your way of living is like your character; one knows one can rely on you, that you are a thoroughly honourable and reliable man."

Again George was embarrassed. "Olga, Olga, why these expressions of affection after so long an acquaintanceship?"

"To-day is just the right moment," she replied, and then with some confusion she added: "This very day, three months ago, I met you for the first time."

"Are you sorry?"

She kissed his hand. "You—you—I—I am awfully fond of you. How could I indeed [Pg 138] be sorry?" Then she continued very earnestly: "You know, for I have already told you, how that blackguard of a lieutenant treated me, and I swore henceforward to be an honourable woman and to have nothing to do with a man. I kept to my resolution for a year. Well, what happened then? Then there came along someone whom I liked very much, and who was very good and kind to me. You know it is very difficult to be respectable on the stage; we inferior ones are always envious of the 'stars' who go about in silk and satin, and who frequently cannot act any better than the others, and who only owe their position to a rich friend who pays for their dresses and arranges with the director and manager that his *protégée* shall be brought out and given a good part. Well, that's how it is, and besides one wants to enjoy one's life; everybody does the same, not only those who are on the stage. We are not the worst; the others who do it all secretly and pose as highly respectable young women, they are really the worst."

"Now, now, Olga, take a glass of wine. Why do you get into a temper? Do be cheerful again."

After a short struggle her naturally kindly disposition got the upper hand. "You are quite right. I cannot alter what has already happened, but still the lieutenant was a blackguard; you remember I told you he shot himself later, and that was the best thing he could do."

[Pg 139] "Don't be so hard, Olga."

"Pray do not stand up for him," she went on angrily. "I know what you feel: that if a young girl accepts an invitation from an officer she must know quite well what to expect. But I was very young and inexperienced then."

"But, Olga, I cannot understand you to-day. What is the matter with you? Why do you insult the officers in this way. You remember I am one."

"Ah, you," she said tenderly. "You are not really one of them. You are much too honourable. You are a man, the others are stuck-up apes, and besides that, generally liars and betrayers."

"Olga, I beg you with all seriousness to cease making these remarks. Whatever is the matter with you? Shall we stay here or go into the sitting-room?" he asked her presently.

"Let us go into the sitting-room," she replied. She loved the large beautiful room with its splendid carpet, heavy *portière* and the fine pictures. Best of all she loved the large comfortable leather seat in front of the fire, and every time that she visited George she meant to ask him to let her sit in that chair after dinner. She had never done so, because on every occasion, to-day included, directly they went into the sitting-room George drew out the *chaise longue* for her, put a cushion under her [Pg 140] head, and covered her with a great bear rug. He always did this, and treated her with so much love and such tender consideration that she had not the heart to tell him how uncomfortable she was.

"Are you comfortable, darling?"

Again, from affection, she told him an untruth: "Simply lovely."

He kissed her tenderly, handed her a cigarette, took a cigar for himself, and then sat down on a chair by her side.

"You do live in a splendid way, George. You can't imagine how happy I feel when I am with you."

"Because you are in my rooms, or because you are with me?"

"Because I am in your rooms, naturally," she said teasingly. "Why ever should I care about you? You are an old cynic who does not deserve that I should like him so much and be so nice to him. Oh, you dear old silly, come here, and let me give you a kiss. Well, now, that will do, be sensible and sit down nicely and tell me what you have been doing lately. What parties have you been to, and with whom have you danced? Whom did you go for your cure with?"

George answered and asked questions. Olga showed a real and sincere interest in everything that concerned him; he knew that he could entirely trust her, and that [Pg 141] later, when they parted, she would make no use of anything he had told her, and so he spoke quite frankly to her. He told her about the regiment, his parents, and his sister, but naturally enough he never spoke a word about Hildegarde. He had not once mentioned her name, and to-day likewise he was silent on the subject. Not indeed that he feared Olga would be jealous; she was too sensible and intelligent for that, and, moreover, she had often said she wished he would marry a lovely and beautiful wife. In spite of all that, however, an inexplicable feeling prevented his speaking about Hildegarde to her.

Olga listened to him attentively; many of the names of the people in Society were familiar to her, she remembered them from his former accounts, and she showed by her questions now and again that she was following him with real interest. Naturally she was most interested in knowing what the ladies wore, but she did not get much information from him on this point.

"How can you be so foolish as not to notice these things?" she scolded him. "A woman is most interested in what another woman has on."

"Or rather what she has *not* on," he said mockingly.

The entrance of the servant put an end to their conversation.

[Pg 142] "A letter has just come for you, sir."

"Any answer?"

"The messenger did not say anything, he did not wait."

"Very well."

The servant disappeared and George held the note a moment in his right hand unopened.

"Who is it from?" inquired Olga.

"I do not know how it is, but a vague feeling tells me that this letter contains something unpleasant for me."

"Shall I read it to you then? If I think the contents will vex you I will tear it up and never tell you what was in it."

He kissed her hand. "You are a dear little thing, but I am afraid that won't do.

Well, let us see what it is."

He opened the envelope with a paper-knife, turned over the sheet and looked at the signature. A slight triumphant smile played round his mouth. "Ah, ha, Willberg, I said so!"

Olga had risen and was leaning her head on her right hand; now she looked at George anxiously and expectantly. "Willberg, what does he want of you? You told me once how oddly he behaved to you. Why does he write you?"

Instead of an answer George handed her the letter, and Olga read:

[Pg 143]

> "Dear Winkler,—Although I am still deep in your debt, and am no more able to discharge it to-day than I was weeks ago, yet I am forced once more to ask you for help, and that as promptly and swiftly as possible. To-day we have been gambling simply frightfully. I lost five thousand marks—four thousand to the Uhlan, on whom I wanted to take my revenge. I must pay this four thousand marks by to-morrow morning, otherwise I must leave the army. I do not know where to get the money from; you are my only means of salvation. You have so often offered me money that I feel quite sure you will not now leave me in the lurch.
>
> "Perhaps you will have the goodness to send the money along by your servant Fritz, your man, or any other human being you like. I shall stay at home and await your answer. I thank you most heartily beforehand for once more getting me out of a terrible scrape.—With sincere regards, yours gratefully,
>
> "F. von Willberg."

Olga folded up the letter and returned it to George.

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"The letter is simply a model," she opined, "short, polite, and childishly *naïve*. 'I have been gambling, please pay my debts. The man writes with a nonchalance and a coolness as if he asked you to take a glass of wine with him. Willberg is simply delicious."

[Pg 144] "Yes, you are not far wrong," said George, who felt somewhat hurt by the tone of the letter. "A young lieutenant, who has nothing in the world to call his own but an allowance of a few pounds, sits down with the greatest confidence at the card-table and gambles away a £50 bank-note, one after the other. When he has come to the end of his ready money he plays for credit, and when the game is over and he is deeply involved, he sits down calmly and writes to his friends and acquaintances: 'Please be so good as to pay my debts.' And if he knows that he can get no help from these sources, because he has already exhausted them, then he applies to any rich man whom perhaps he has only met twice in his life, and borrows from him with a *naïveté* and a shamelessness that is inimitable. He knows quite well that he must get the money somewhere. If matters do not go so smoothly as he anticipated, he becomes melodramatic, talks about leaving the regiment, abandoning the army, Courts of Honour, a bullet through his head, and such things. And there are very few people who are not moved when it is a question of saving, as they say, a young and promising human life—which in most cases is not worth the value of the bullet. And so they put their hands in their pocket and give the lieutenant what he needs to set [Pg 145] him on his legs again and be once more an 'honourable' man. I do not know if you will understand what I am going to say, Olga, but the greatest misfortune for our lieutenants is—I do not say our officers, but only our lieutenants—that on account of their uniform and position they can get credit everywhere. Many educated, or only half-educated, rich people who gladly entertain the officers, so that they may be considered in 'Society,' constantly press their assistance upon these lieutenants just on the chance of their getting into difficulties. The lieutenant sees it all quite clearly; he says to himself: 'I get into debt, somebody else will pay.' And our lieutenants will remain as they are, and will never alter until they are no longer given credit; he will only change when people are no longer foolish enough to lend money to every lieutenant who wants it."

"And do you suppose that day will come?"

"It will come when the world ceases to see in every man who wears a uniform a marvellous creature."

"Then that will be never."

"I almost believe you are right," he agreed with her; and then, becoming even more serious, he went on: "You know it's very hard on our lieutenants, for, *au fond*, there is good stuff in them, but they get frightfully spoiled and petted. Officers are [Pg 146] forbidden to contract debts just as they are forbidden to gamble; but nobody troubles in the least about these prohibitions, which are known, not only to the officers themselves, but to everybody in Society and to the tradesmen. But, just as in a club a civilian would never dream of saying to a lieutenant, 'Sir, I do not wish to be discourteous, but I know that His Majesty has forbidden the officers to play cards,' so no tradesman would think of saying to a lieutenant, 'I am not allowed to give you goods on credit; I know you are not allowed to contract debts.' The lieutenant alone is not to blame. Society and the tradesman, who not only make it possible for him to evade the law, but also help him to do it quite easily, and even lead him into doing so are largely responsible for the fact that our officers of to-day, in regard to manners and morals, are no longer what they once were and what they will have to be again." And then, half-seriously, half-laughingly, he concluded, "Did you understand all I was talking about, you dear little duffer?"

"Every word, and you are quite right."

"I only wish that other people would think so too," he said, somewhat amused; "but I believe that if one of the 'Golden Butterflies' had heard my remarks he would have said I was out of my mind, summoned me before a Court of Honour on account of my seditious words, and then I should have been asked, 'If you think like this, why
[Pg 147] did you become an officer?' I could only answer, 'When a man enters upon a career he knows nothing about it. Indeed, he *can* know nothing about it. The knowledge of what it means to be an officer only comes with the course of years.' I have had my apprenticeship. I have gone through the world with fairly wide-open eyes, and have kept my ears on the alert, and I must say that had I known earlier what it was like among our officers, had I had the faintest conception of their behaviour, of the way in which they ran up debts, of the discontent with military matters, the bitterness and hatred against the authorities, the poverty and the misery, I should have thought twice before donning a uniform."

"But why do you keep it on?"

George gazed at the clouds of smoke for a little while, then he asked her, "Are you quite sure, my dear child, you are not really bored with all this discussion?"

"Not at all," she cried out quickly; "I could lie here for hours and listen to you."

"Very well then, I will answer your question, which I have been thinking about for a long time, much longer than anyone would believe. The reason why I still wear the officer's uniform is, in my case, short and to the point—pride."

"Pride!" she asked with astonishment.

[Pg 148] "You know, of course, how I have been treated in the regiment. I have never made the least mystery about it to you. If I were to take off my uniform now, the 'Golden Butterflies' would have attained the object they had desired from the very first—they would have got rid of me, they would again be among themselves; their aristocratic society would be again without spot or blemish. I am not going to give them that triumph, which would mean defeat for me. I am not a fighter, but I have my ambition and my honourable feelings, and I intend to see if I cannot make a proper position for myself in the regiment. How often do I not long for a chance of distinguishing myself in some way or other, of doing something out of the ordinary—but in vain. So I must try to win a position by scrupulous fulfilment of my military duties, diligence and reliability. Do you imagine I have a pleasant life here? I am young, I am rich, and though I am no spendthrift, still I should like to enjoy my youth a little more than I do. I should like to live on a bigger scale, keep horses, and carriages, and servants, go travelling about, and so on. I know perfectly well what I should do, but I simply dare not. If the adjutant of the regiment, Count Wettborn, did all this, the officers would be proud of the nobleman who knew how to represent them in so splendid a fashion: everybody would be delighted that he had the means of living in a manner so
[Pg 149] suitable to his rank. They would praise the aristocrat; they would find fault with me. If I lived in grand style, only one word would be applied to me—snob. And short work is always made with a snob. He is not wanted in a regiment in which the other officers are supposed to live economically, but who, in reality, are over head and ears in debt. My so-called ostentation and snobbery would be an excellent reason for getting rid of me, and I don't want that. I do not myself believe that my life as a lieutenant will be a long one; but whenever I do go, I shall be able to tell myself and the others why I am going. *I* shall hold my head high, but *they* will be covered with shame, if, indeed, they are capable of feeling shame."

Olga saw the deep furrows on his brow, and she noticed his intense emotion.

"George," she begged in a gentle voice, "come here to me, let me kiss you, do not get so angry about these officers."

"My darling, it is all very well for you to talk—not get angry indeed! To-day seems specially appointed for the revelation of all kinds of things which have hitherto been kept silent. I may as well tell you, therefore, that I suffer frightfully in my present surroundings, yet I am conscious of no other fault but that of belonging to the middle-class. If, indeed, these aristocratic gentlemen were free from all faults and

[Pg 150] failings, if they were really superior in military and other duties, if the officers were in very truth what they ought to be—an example of chivalry and honour; if they possessed nobility, not only of birth but of feeling and disposition, then I would not hesitate for a moment. I would say to them frankly and freely: 'I feel that my presence is unwelcome to you. From the modern and enlightened point of view I do not in the least understand your standpoint, but in spite of that I honour you, and I will no longer be an annoyance to you.' But consider how matters really stand? Of course, there are exceptions, honourable exceptions everywhere, and it would indeed be sad if there were not any among the nobility. I can only judge, however, by what I have seen myself, and I must say that in their mode of life and interest in their military duties, the most aristocratic officers are not one whit superior to my *bourgeois* comrades, whom they look down upon with such contempt. And what a protection a title is! The world, which nowadays is more or less democratic, is not to have the pleasure of seeing an aristocrat sentenced to punishment, the people are not to be given the joy of saying: 'After all, these noblemen are just like other people.' In every way a nobleman has all kinds of advantages, not because he *does* anything [Pg 151] particularly wonderful, but simply because, according to old women's tales, he *is* something wonderful. And one can no more fight against this than against stupidity. I get so enraged about this, that in spite of my uniform I am almost inclined to be a social democrat. I see more and more how the middle-class person is more or less regarded as a creature whose only justification for existing is that he forms the dark background which shows up the nobleman so brilliantly and gloriously."

"Good gracious, George," cried out Olga, quite frightened, "I don't know you when you are in this mood; I have never heard you speak, boy, so bitterly before."

"I am not bitter now, I assure you. What I told you was not said on the spur of the moment, but is the result of much thought and mature and keen observation. But now let us stop speaking about these serious things. I will just go and send off the money to this noble Willberg, and then, my darling, I am entirely at your disposal."

He rose from his seat to go to his writing-desk, but Olga held him back. "Will you do me a favour, George. You know I have never asked you for anything important, but this time it is. Will you grant it me?"

"Certainly, if I can. Why not? I am very fond of you."

[Pg 152] "And I am very fond of you; it is just because of that I ask you to give me your word that you will do what I want."

"My darling, how can I do such a thing? One must not pledge his word of honour lightly; you know perfectly well I would do anything for you if I could. Now what is it?"

She had risen from her reclining position, and looked at him entreatingly, her eyes dilating. She was quite white from mental excitement, and her voice trembled as she said: "Do me the favour, and don't send the money to Willberg."

He regarded her with intense astonishment. "Why ever not? The money is lying idle here, and even if I hadn't it myself I could easily get it. I have constantly offered Willberg my help; I must certainly give it him now. Besides, it is a great satisfaction to me, as you will understand, that he should have to apply to me again. You don't want to spoil my pleasure, do you?"

And he turned to go, but Olga kept him back. "George, give your money to whomsoever you like—do with it whatever you like—it is no concern of mine, but you must not help Willberg. Do you understand? You ought not to help him!"

She spoke with such resolution and determination that he went up to her and seized her hand; he noticed how she trembled, and a feeling of nervous excitement took possession of him.

[Pg 153] "Olga, you are keeping silent about something; you must have reasons which you are concealing from me, but I insist on knowing everything. When you ask me not to help Willberg, and tell me that I ought not to help him, you must also tell me the reason why."

She looked at him with an expression of profound love. "Do not ask me, do not torture me, I cannot tell you."

"And what if I insist?" He also had become deadly pale, and he held her hand in an iron grip. "I insist upon knowing—do you understand? You must not utter a half complaint, but you must have the courage to tell the whole truth. I have always considered you an honourable, faithful and upright person—don't show me I have made a mistake."

A mighty conflict raged within her as she stood by him; her eyes were cast down, her whole body trembled, and she was swayed and tossed about by terrible mental struggles. Then she raised her eyes and looked at him frankly and openly. "Very well, then, you shall know all, but only on one condition."

"And what is that?"

"That you give me your word of honour not to tell Willberg a word of what I am going to tell you. There is no reason why you should not do that."

He regarded her doubtfully. "Is that really so?"

[Pg 154] Then she looked him straight in the face. "Yes, but, in spite of this, if you are ever in a situation when you can no longer keep your promise, then I will release you after eight days—no more nor less; till then, you can quietly think over what I have to say to you." And after a little while she asked him, in a hesitating tone of voice, "Do you really insist that I am to tell you everything, when the result may be that we separate, and are never more friends?"

A dark suspicion arose in his mind. "You were once on intimate terms with Willberg?" he asked with excitement, but then, more calmly, he went on: "But I could not very well be angry with you about that, for you could not have possibly known then that we should ever have met."

Olga bit her lips in fury. "I know that only too well. I told you that the villain who betrayed me took his life soon after. That was not true; he is still living, and his name is Willberg."

George fell back as if he had been struck, then he sprang up and seized Olga by the shoulders. "Tell me, it is not true—it cannot be true."

She freed herself from his grasp. "Come, George, be reasonable; what has happened cannot be altered now."

He sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "What a blackguard!" he [Pg 155] said, gnashing his teeth, "what a blackguard!" And suddenly springing up, he demanded: "Swear on your oath—have you still any connection with him, or does he know that we are intimate?"

"I am perfectly faithful to you," she answered him calmly, and he knew from the tone of her voice that she was speaking the truth. "I have only seen Willberg once since."

"And when was that?" he asked, with great excitement.

"On the very day that I met you for the first time. He sent me a letter, saying he must see me without fail on a matter that concerned my own interests. At first I did not mean to answer him, but when I read the letter again, I felt sure that it really was a matter of serious importance. So I named an hour when I would be at home to him. And he came."

"Go on," urged George, as she was silent for a moment. "What did this honourable gentleman want with you?"

"He said he had quite by chance seen us together one evening, and had followed us unobserved—I had no ground for denying my acquaintanceship with you; indeed, I could not, in view of what he had seen—and he entreated me most imploringly not to mention his name to you. I had never intended to do so, and had formerly made up [Pg 156] my mind to be silent concerning his name, but, in spite of that, I appeared as if I were greatly astonished, and asked why he made such a request?"

"And what did he answer?"

"He said that he must admit that he had not treated me quite fairly that night."

"'Quite fairly'—that is splendid!" sneered George.

"He knew that he ought to have given me some compensation, but he was not then in a position to do anything for me. Now he offered me one thousand marks, partly as hush-money for the future."

"Did you take the money?"

"Before his very eyes I threw it into the blazing fire, and rejoiced in his look of horror. After that he returned to the object of his visit. He begged me not to tell you what had happened. He and you were in the same regiment, I ought not disturb the friendship which existed between you. Probably you would not think he had acted quite rightly (so he said), it might lead to a quarrel. Such a thing is very disagreeable, especially in a proud and distinguished regiment, which, more than all others, must preserve outward appearances. And, besides, you could not fight a duel on my behalf. To cut the story short, I don't remember what else he said; I listened to him without answering a word, and the longer I was silent the more humble and [Pg 157] pitiable he became, till at last he stood before me like a schoolboy who has been severely rebuked. He fell on his knees, begged my pardon, and entreated me to keep silence; it was then that I promised never to mention his name to you. To-day I have given his name, but I was compelled. It is your fault, not mine, for I spoke on your account. You may be sure I don't want to run the risk of losing you because of him."

Suddenly she was overcome with anguish that now she would be repulsive and hateful in his sight; she sprang towards him and fell on her knees. "George, tell me you still love me, that you will not send me away—it was not my fault."

He bent over her and kissed her on the forehead.

"Get up, dear, why should I be angry with you, indeed? How could I hold you responsible for what a villain did, and it's not your fault that his name is Willberg? But he shall answer for what he has done."

"He must not do that," cried Olga; "you have given me your word to tell him nothing about it, and you will keep it, for I do not believe that any occasion will arise to make me absolve you from your promise."

He sank into a chair and looked gloomily in front of him. Had he the slightest ground for proceeding against Willberg? He might of course say to him: "I know a young girl, and am aware that you have treated her like a blackguard." Willberg [Pg 158] could not possibly allow this insult to pass unnoticed; there would be, at the least, a quarrel, probably a duel, and, as a result, an investigation by a Court of Honour. A good deal of dirt would be thrown about, but what would be the use of that? Willberg would most likely be dismissed from the army, and what then? What advantage would that be to anybody? There would be one less dishonourable man in the army certainly, but who would have to bear the consequences of that? Only George, for he would never be pardoned for having acted so harshly towards the darling of the regiment. Willberg after his dismissal would still find faithful friends enough who would help him. He would not suffer too excessively in no longer wearing officer's uniform. No, George could take no steps against him, he had no case against him; he was obliged to admit to himself that personally Willberg had done him no harm, no injury, and if he stepped in on behalf of Olga's honour, the town and the world would shake their heads, and the colonel would make it quite clear to him that men do not fight a duel on account of a young woman like Olga. She was certainly an excellent, worthy young woman, she was under a talented actress, but still—in imagination George heard their remarks, and he doubled up his fists in a fury of rage. Then another thought occurred to him. What would his parents, what would Hildegarde [Pg 159] say, when they learnt that he had fought a duel for the sake of his mistress? They must not know anything whatever about the matter.

For nearly five minutes George sat deeply immersed in thought, and Olga watched his expression with intense anxiety: her reputation, her career, were at stake. What had taken place between her and Willberg was known only to themselves and George; she had told no one about it; she had never mentioned the name of her betrayer. If George thought the affair ought not to rest with him, and that he ought to inform the Court of Honour concerning it, then she would be forced to absolve him from his promise, and the whole town would learn in a few days what up till to-day was a secret. She would not be able to remain in Berlin; she felt that she could never again face an audience who knew how she had been treated.

"Well, George," she said at last, "have you yet made up your mind what you are going to do?"

"Yes," he answered firmly, "the blackguard deserves to be struck in the face, but I shall not do that; I shall not say a word of what you have told me to anyone, not even to him, however difficult it may be for me. But I am obliged to act thus on your account, for I care too much about you to expose you to public discussion, public [Pg 160] gossip, and probably to universal condemnation, for the world must have suddenly changed if in spite of everything it does not hold you to blame. But as I have just said, I will not do so, and so there's an end of the matter."

She clung to him and put her arm round his neck.

"Thank you, George."

He led her to the *chaise longue* and sat down by her side. "Good God, what filth! There is just one thing I should like to know. Do you happen to remember the day—I mean the date when this—this—creature came to you and entreated you to keep silence?"

"How could I not remember it?" she said teasingly, trying to restore him to a happier frame of mind: "don't you know I just told you it was the day after I first met you. Surely, George, you have not forgotten *that*!"

He knitted his brow. "Don't be vexed, Olga, but my brain is in such a whirl just now that I simply can't remember a thing."

She took from her finger a diamond ring which he had given her in remembrance of their first meeting, on which the date was engraved. Then she handed it to him.

"Yes, of course, how could I have forgotten it!" He was suddenly thoughtful, and then he jumped up with a start.

"What is the matter now?" she asked, frightened.

[Pg 161] "Nothing, nothing," he assured her; "I just remembered that when Willberg came to me for the first time to borrow money, he must have known of our relations. He had seen you, and yet he had the audacity to come to me. Now it's all clear to me; now I understand why he begged me so urgently not to say a word to anyone; he feared that perhaps I would tell you, and that then it would come out how he had treated you. Of course, that was it!"

He strode up and down the room, occupied with his own thoughts.

"George," Olga begged; "do me the favour of writing a few words to Willberg. Tell him you cannot give him the money, and then forget the hateful story."

George stood still. "You are right; Willberg is waiting for news. I forgot all about that; and the forms of politeness must be preserved, however difficult it may be."

He wrote a few lines, in which he regretted that he was not at the moment able to place the money desired at his friend's disposal, and then he sent his servant with the note.

"One thing worries me," said George: "I do not know if I have enough self-control and strength of mind to meet Willberg calmly to-morrow and act as if I was not aware of his shameful behaviour."

[Pg 162] "Can't you keep out of his way. He is in another company, I know, and is he not in a different battalion?"

"That is so, but of course I meet him at mess, and even if I do not meet him to-morrow I shall have to the next day, for we may not absent ourselves from the mess dinner for more than two days without an adequate reason. I fear that my blood may not be sufficiently cool by then."

Olga thought for a moment, then she asked: "Cannot you get leave of absence? I should of course be very sorry not to see you for a week or a fortnight, but a holiday would do you good; you would enjoy yourself and have a change of thought. You could easily get leave, I should think."

"That is so," he agreed, "there is not much doing just at present, and they could not refuse me leave of absence, but where should I go? Home? I don't want to see my father and mother just now. I could not be light-hearted and gay, and they would notice that something depressed me; my coming would upset them instead of delighting them."

"I know," cried Olga suddenly: "You said just now you would like to enjoy your life. Go for a fortnight to Paris, to Monte Carlo, or anywhere else where it is delightful, and when you see beautiful women, give them my greeting, and tell them they are to
[Pg 163] be good and kind to you; I shall not be jealous." And then with a roguish laugh she added: "You know you will not remain faithful to me."

"I shall," he said firmly.

"No, no," she answered laughingly. "I wager anything you won't."

"But I shall have no chance of being unfaithful to you."

She looked at him astonished. "How do you mean? For what reason?"

"For the simplest of all reasons—you will come with me."

"George!" Laughing and crying with joy, she flung her arms round his neck. "You will take me with you? I shall see Paris or some other beautiful town? George, you are really too good and kind," and she kissed him again and again. Suddenly she stopped.

"What is the matter with you?"

"I cannot go with you."

"Why ever not?"

"You shall not be able to say that I persuaded you into taking a holiday for my own advantage; besides, I do not know if I can get permission to go."

"The first reason is absurd," he said. "I am not so sure if it will be a pleasure to come with me, but you give me great happiness by your company. Nothing is more unpleasant, at least to me, than to travel alone, to sit in a carriage by oneself, to have
[Pg 164] meals alone, to wander through the museums and galleries alone, and to have no one with whom one can discuss things. There will be no difficulty about getting permission; just now you are not very busy at the theatre."

"Yes, but—the *répertoire* may be changed any day."

"Dear child," he assured her, "your director is not a brute. To-morrow ask him to give you leave of absence, and if he makes any difficulties tell him you are prepared to pay two to three thousand marks' compensation if he will absolve you from a fortnight's duty. I assure you he will give you a holiday for as long as you like."

She seized hold of his hand and kissed it gratefully. "How dear and kind you are. Do you mean you will pay so much money to free me from my engagement? But I can tell you I shall first offer five hundred marks, then another five hundred, and so on, but under no circumstances will I give more than two thousand."

He laughed gaily. "You can do as you like as regards that. I will give you the money at once. Whatever you have over belongs to you, of course."

She clapped her hands with joy. "I shall buy a very elegant travelling costume with it."

"Don't do it, darling," he requested. "Whatever you need in the way of dresses I [Pg 165] will buy you in Paris. During all the time that I have been a lieutenant I have never spent half my allowance, and so it has gone on accumulating. Now I can spend a large sum of money without any conscientious scruples."

"Shall we really go to Paris?" she asked, with beaming eyes.

"If all goes well, to-morrow evening. We will take my man with us. I can rely absolutely on his silence. You will get in at the North Station, I at the South. I will carefully examine the train to see if any of my acquaintances are in it, and I will have a carriage reserved for us, so that we may travel in state. And if anybody sees us together later on, what does it matter? And, besides, who knows us in Paris?"

"Have you ever been there?"

"Yes."

He began to tell of the beauties and charms of Paris, and, tenderly clinging to him, she listened to his description of the delights which she was to enjoy with him.

CHAPTER VII

An Aristocratic Household

Hildegarde's father was about to celebrate his sixtieth birthday, and the old major had expressed a wish to see his two children on that day. Fritz had naturally made use of this occasion of rejoicing as an excuse for asking the Warnows to lend him a good sum for travelling expenses; of course he had to travel first-class, and take his man with him, besides which he really must give the old gentleman a nice present for his birthday. So Captain von Warnow had once more given him a £50 note. Fritz, thereupon, had naturally tried his luck at cards, and he had the disgrace, as he himself called it, of winning a couple of hundred pounds from the owner of an estate in the neighbourhood; this did not often happen to him; he beamed with joy, and for the first time for many days he found once more that life was still endurable.

Hildegarde at first did not want to make the journey, she felt hurt at her father's letter, in which he wrote: "My dear child, I should, of course, be immensely delighted [Pg 167] to see you, but my personal wishes must not be considered if there is anything important at stake. If you cannot come, or find it unwise to go away now for a few days, then stay where you are and strike while the iron is hot."

She did not want to go, for she foresaw exactly what would happen at home, but her aunt persuaded her to take the journey. Winkler was on furlough, so it was said, at Monte Carlo and on the Riviera, he was not returning for a week. There were no big entertainments before then, and in any case, if Winkler were away, there would be no object in going to them, it would only mean the unnecessary expense of new dresses. She had no desire to throw away her money on men who had no serious intentions with regard to her niece. And there was also another reason why Frau von Warnow urged Hildegarde to go; she wanted to be alone with her husband again and to be able to do something else during the week but worry and bother about her engagement. She was thankful that George and Hildegarde would be away at the same time. In a week they would both be back, and it was to be hoped that the matter would soon be brought to a happy conclusion. She felt perfectly satisfied that Lieutenant Winkler was deeply interested in Hildegarde. When George had announced his leave of absence to her husband he had requested most earnestly to [Pg 168] be remembered to his wife and Hildegarde. It was quite irregular, from a military point of view, and it was just because of that that Frau von Warnow regarded it as a good sign.

So Hildegarde went home. She went by a morning train and her parents met her at the station. Fritz was expected in less than an hour, and so they stayed at the station. They went into the restaurant to have something to eat, for Hildegarde was tired and hungry from the long and wearisome journey on the branch line.

The waiter hastened towards them, and the proprietor himself came forward to see to their orders. The major as an officer, and more especially as a baron, was one of the great people of the town; he was indeed the only actual baron there, although there were a few more or less old "Vons," and thus he played an important rôle in the little town, although his financial position was well known.

The major was the type of the retired military man, of medium size, well-built, a somewhat red face and enormous moustaches. His wife was still an extremely nice-looking woman, and one could see that in her youth she must have been really beautiful.

They chattered about matters of indifference till the meal was served, but Hildegarde noticed only too clearly how impatient her parents were to hear something about her prospective engagement; she tried to avoid a conversation on [Pg 169] the subject, but was unsuccessful. Scarcely had the waiter brought in the meal, and been given the order not to come back till they rang for him, when they both drew their chairs near to Hildegarde. "Now, dear child, tell us all about it. Relieve us of a great anxiety. How do matters stand with you?"

Hildegarde parried the question; what could she really say? It was certainly very likely that George, when he had got to know her better, would one day ask for her hand in marriage, and that was the only thing she could say. But she read in her parents' faces such fear, and yet such hope, that she had not the heart to deprive them of their joy. Suddenly she thought of a way out of the difficulty. She briefly referred to George, and then spoke at length concerning another very rich man who had lately paid her an immense amount of attention.

"But, dear child, your aunt has never told me a word about this, and she always keeps me informed as to the admirer of the hour."

"Oh, that is what she does," thought Hildegarde. Then she said: "Mamma, I don't want you to write to aunt about this; oddly enough she hasn't noticed this gentleman's attentions to me, and I did not tell her anything about it. You know what aunt is; she means to do the very best for me, and in her efforts to help me, perhaps she goes too far and spoils things."

[Pg 170] "And what is his name? What is he?" inquired her mother.

Hildegarde blushed scarlet. "Please do not ask me; I don't want to talk about it while the thing is still so uncertain."

"Quite right, my child," commended the major, "one ought not to talk about things until they are settled"; and turning to his wife he continued, "Do not press Hildegarde any more. If she does not want to talk about it you may be sure she has good reasons." Then he shook hands with his daughter. "Thank you, dear Hilda, that in honour of this day you give me *this pleasure*; two celebrations instead of one. Ah, it will probably soon be all settled"; and then he added, with a deep sigh, "But it's high time, I can tell you, Hilda, I could not hold out much longer."

Her mother also sighed and said gently:

"Hilda, you have no idea what terrible times we have been through while you were in Berlin. Just think of it, the municipal authorities were about to issue a distress warrant for the taxes, and your father had to strain every nerve to get an adjournment."

"Yes, indeed, that was a stiff bit of work, I can tell you, and if I had not been able to make use of my well-known name, God knows the fellow would have seized my last bit of furniture; those people have no mercy."

"None to the common people, at any rate," Hildegarde interposed.

[Pg 171] "And they are quite right," affirmed the major; "the State cannot live without taxes, and if it were to take under its protection every working man and tradesman who is behindhand with his taxes, where would that lead to? We should soon run dry and have no money for soldiers, pensions and other important things. The State must be without mercy, and if it makes an exception in our case it does so because it knows perfectly well that it can do so; an aristocrat always does his duty towards the State and his fellow-creatures."

Hildegarde did not venture to contradict, she could not indeed do so without convicting her father of lying.

The major had finished his beer. "What a miserable drink this is for lunch, it makes one feel heavy and spoils one's appetite. What do you say to our celebrating this meeting with half a bottle of champagne?" His wife had no wish to do so. She feared the expense; but, on the other hand, she knew it was useless to oppose him, and, perhaps, indeed it would help to raise their credit a little if the proprietor of the restaurant said that they had drunk champagne and paid for it in cash. So she agreed. "Yes, certainly, but please let it be French champagne."

"Of course," said the major; "do you suppose I would celebrate the joyful news [Pg 172] that Hilda brings us with miserable frothy German champagne?" and he called to the waiter.

It was on Hildegarde's lips to say: "Spare your money; you have no occasion to rejoice in what I have just told you, it was a pure fabrication." But she remained silent. Why should she worry her parents? Perhaps somehow or other a miracle would happen and it would all come right in the end.

"No, bring a whole bottle of Pommery," corrected the major; "my son is soon coming, he will also be thirsty, and it's not worth while beginning with half a bottle."

The wine came, the glasses clinked, and Hildegarde was asked to tell her news again. "Not here," she begged; "there is no more uncomfortable place to stay in than a waiting-room, and especially in a little provincial town."

"All fancy, my dear child, all fancy," her father informed her. "When I was a young lieutenant I was once stationed at a miserable hole which Satan, if he likes, may utterly destroy; at last a station was built, and day after day we strolled up there and felt as jolly and as comfortable in the miserable little waiting-room as we had never felt before. If we had not had that station, and had not been able to go to the station daily, I really do believe we could not have endured the life for long; we should have gone out of our minds. When we had done our daily military duty the day's work was [Pg 173] over for us, then there was only one thing to be settled: when and how were we to go to bed? Should we go early and sober, or late and drunk? Now we had a higher object in life; we must go and see the arrival and departure of the trains, and we did this quite as conscientiously as we did our other duties. You can't imagine the joy when one of us by chance discovered an acquaintance in the train; whether he liked it or not he was hauled out of the carriage, and if we could not do it otherwise we used force. And once we had captured a guest, with much craft and cunning, we didn't let him go easily, I can assure you. He was, to a certain extent, placed under military supervision so that he could not escape. Our visitor had perfect freedom; he could do whatever he liked, only he must not go to the station. When at last he really had to go away, and when he had showed us most unmistakably that he really could not stay away longer, we only let him off by paying huge toll. Ha! ha! We were nothing but highwaymen; but, good gracious, what on earth could one do in such a dull hole of a place?"

The major liked telling stories about his life in the little garrison town, in which he appeared to have much enjoyed himself in spite of his grumbling and swearing. When he spoke of the days when he was a young lieutenant he nearly always began [Pg 174] his description with, "We were gay dogs in these days," and then he winked knowingly and smacked his lips in remembrance of the jolly days when wine, women and dice played the chief part. Probably the memory of his life in the little garrison town was so delightful because, to a certain extent, it was merely an episode. Immediately after his marriage he had been transferred to Berlin and had taken a good position there because he was a thoroughly good-natured man and an excellent officer; his wife was regarded as the *belle* of Society. A great career had been prophesied for him, but one day all his prospects were ruined in consequence of an unjust criticism at inspection parade. The contemptuous tone in which the General, before all the officers, criticised the way he did his work made his blood boil, and he so far lost his self-control as to say to the General that, after all, he was only a human being like himself, and that he could not admit the justice of his remarks. This was more than insubordination, and the major might consider himself lucky that he escaped with dismissal instead of being punished. He left the army, but a little later the General was also dismissed; his methods of criticism had also not been approved of in higher quarters.

When the major began to tell of the days when he was a lieutenant he went on from one story to another, and though his womenfolk had heard them all over and [Pg 175] over again, they listened attentively to him from affection; for he had nothing on earth to do but tell these stories of the gay or wearisome times he had had as an officer. If, as now, he had a little champagne by his side, everything in the past had a golden halo around it; when he sat at home with his money bothers he had not a good word for the whole army.

At last the train which was to bring Fritz was signalled.

The major looked into the bottle, it was empty; he turned to the waiter to order another one, when his womenfolk interposed. "Let us go home when Fritz comes, it is much nicer there; besides, we have to dress for dinner."

Grumbling, the major agreed. "Very well, then, I must pay." He looked into his purse. "Good gracious, I forgot to put in a five-pound note. I have not enough money with me."

"Oh, that does not matter, sir," averred the waiter; "the gentleman can pay when he comes next time."

Hildegarde grew scarlet, she felt ready to sink to the ground for shame; she knew the trick so well, she had been witness innumerable times when her father had forgotten the five-pound note which, as a rule, he never possessed. How had she forgotten about this for the moment? Never, never should her father remain in debt [Pg 176] for a meal of which she had partaken. So she opened her purse. "I have some change, father. How much do you want?" And without waiting for an answer she pushed two gold coins towards the waiter.

"Ah, that's right, Hilda, only don't forget to remind me to give you back the money directly we get home."

The waiter was about to give her some change, but Hildegarde did not take it. "That's all right, keep the change for yourself."

They got up and went on to the platform. "Hilda, how could you be so foolish as to pay," scolded the major; "to-morrow it will be all over the town that you have come back with money, and in honour of my birthday the people will dun me for their accounts. One must either pay all or nothing. I cannot do the first, so I have all carefully noted down, and later I shall settle the whole bodily at one go."

Hildegarde was vexed at this way of looking at things. "What do you think about this, mother?"

The baroness shrugged her shoulders. "I should prefer to pay ready money for everything, but as we cannot do that we must adopt another method. But the people know very well that they will get their money." And drawing Hildegarde aside she asked in a whisper, "Tell me, pray—I am consumed with anxiety and I wonder your father has not yet asked you—what did the Warnows send as a birthday present?"

[Pg 177] "Uncle sent by me a cheque for six thousand marks (£300) on the local branch of the Imperial Bank."

"Not more than that?"

"Oh, mamma!"

Hildegarde could not speak. She herself was more than humiliated by her uncle's kindness. She had reckoned up what he had spent in the course of years for her parents, Fritz and herself. It is true he was very rich, and in spite of his splendid way of living and all that he gave away he did not live up to his income; but his kindness had so greatly shamed and affected her that she had long ago declined to accept any money from him.

Her mother, absorbed in thought, walked to and fro with Hildegarde, whilst her father inquired of the station-master why the gate was not yet open.

"Now," she said, "I fear your father will be somewhat disappointed. I know that he secretly reckoned upon ten thousand (£500). Six thousand (£300) is, of course, a lot of money. Nobody must know anything about it, or people will try and get it out of us at once."

The arrival of the train brought the conversation to an end, and Fritz hastened towards his parents and sister and greeted them heartily. He was in faultless civilian costume, which betrayed the officer in every detail.

"How do you do, mamma? How do, papa? How do, Hilda? How nice that we're all [Pg 178] here together again! We'll celebrate the next few days properly." He looked round for his servant. "Where's the idiot? 'Pon my word, these fellows get more idiotic every day. Ah, there he comes."

The servant, in plain blue livery, appeared, and Fritz handed him his luggage ticket.

"If you, thick-skinned brute, imagine that I take you with me for your private pleasure, then you have made a mistake. You are here for me, do you understand? And if you dawdle about here and don't do your damned duty, then I'll have you shut up in barracks for a few days and dismissed. Do you understand? Now, look sharp and put the luggage in the carriage."

"At your service, sir." The servant hurried out to fulfil his orders.

Hildegarde had noticed how the soldier had blushed when his lieutenant had rated him in this contemptuous manner before the ladies and the other travellers. She said to her brother, "Don't be so disagreeable to your servant. Probably he has been looking forward to the holiday. Don't spoil his pleasure for him."

"It doesn't matter to me whether the fellow enjoys himself or not. The important thing is for me to be properly looked after, and, moreover, I must beg you, courteously but emphatically, not to give me instructions as to how I am to treat my [Pg 179] people. Do not interfere in things that don't concern you. Tell me instead how things are with you. Are we soon to congratulate you, eh?"

They had, meanwhile, taken their places in the carriage. The luggage had been put in, the servant mounted the box, and in a moment the carriage drove off at a trot to the villa where the major lived.

Hildegarde did not answer, and Fritz had to repeat his question; but he read in his mother's glance, which told him not to press his sister further, that all was going on well, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

After a short drive they reached their home, and a little later they joined one another at dinner. The major beamed with pleasure at having his two children with him again, and in honour of the day, and as a preparation for the morrow, they had the best wines and the richest food. After dinner they sat for a long time over the coffee and cigars. The brother and sister had to tell everything that had happened to them, the former in his little provincial garrison, the latter in Berlin.

Although the major loved his beautiful daughter dearly, Fritz was certainly his favourite; everything that he did was right, everything that he said was marvellous.

Hildegarde, on the contrary, found her brother, whom she had not seen for some time, more intolerable than ever. He was amazingly proud and conceited—the typical [Pg 180] young officer who has nothing, is nothing, and yet solely on the strength of his uniform imagines himself to be a superior being. His appearance was as affected as his behaviour; the waxed moustache standing out proudly, the eyeglass which he never for a moment removed from his eye, and his up-to-date civilian's dress. He was really rather nice-looking, his figure was slim and elegant, and he had a fresh, open countenance, though somewhat unintelligent and expressionless, and he wore an affected air of boredom.

Of course he talked of nothing but his horses, his duties, his comrades, and this bored Hildegarde so that she got up on the pretext of going to rest a little. Her mother also rose after she had arranged with her daughter to pay some visits in the afternoon.

As soon as father and son were alone together it was: "What do you say if we were to drink another bottle of wine?"

"I'm quite agreeable."

The wine was brought, and for a short time they continued their former conversation, then they spoke of Hildegarde.

"Really, how handsome the girl still is!" said Fritz. "And do you think that this time it will come off?"

To-day the major saw everything in roseate hues. "Yes, most certainly. Hildegarde has two on the cards; one in any case will come up to the scratch."

[Pg 181] Fritz groaned aloud. "God grant it!"

"Yes, Heaven help us!" assented his father, then he went on: "Well, now, as we clearly see deliverance before us, you need no longer keep any secrets from me, especially as you know quite well that I cannot pay your debts. I told you that directly you became an officer. I said to you then: 'Have as many debts as you like, but look to yourself for paying them.' Now confess, how much do you owe?"

Fritz was for a moment embarrassed. "Do you really want to know?"

"Why not? As I am not going to pay them you may be quite sure I shall not reproach you."

Fritz bit another cigar. "Taking it all in all, from first to last, it must be about forty thousand marks."

"And how long have you been a lieutenant?"

"Seven years."

"Then that would be at the rate of about six thousand a year; it can't be called a small amount."

Fritz shrugged his shoulders. "What is one to do? The life of an officer is expensive, and then one is not born into the world simply to perform one's military duties. One cannot manage on the allowance you give me."

"Another perhaps might—you cannot."

"I don't think anyone else, at least no one in my regiment, could; they are all in
[Pg 182] debt, some more, some less. I should say that 75 per cent. of all the lieutenants from time to time do confess to their parents, then a couple of thousands or so are paid—naturally each time they say it is the very last—and the son is once more on his legs again. Now, if one multiplies by seven the amount that the others pay yearly in debts, it amounts to a pretty big sum of money. With me the matter is somewhat more complicated, because I have never paid a farthing, and when one is in such a plight as I am one naturally has to pay very high interest. The last time, in spite of great skill and cunning, I received a thousand marks when I gave an I O U for three thousand."

"Still, that's something," laughed his father.

Involuntarily Fritz joined in the laugh, then he became serious again and asked, "How are things with you, father?"

The major smoked on furiously for a moment. "Don't ask me, my son, things are very bad indeed with me."

The old gentleman looked so full of despair that Fritz felt sincere sympathy, "Poor father, all will soon be better again."

"Perhaps so; but will you believe it, that in spite of the fact that I am not a man of prejudice, I cannot bear the idea of accepting money from my son-in-law, not only to pay my debts, but in order to exist?"

Fritz looked at him with astonishment. "I cannot understand it."

[Pg 183] "That is because you are a young lieutenant, unmarried, and have no one in the world to look after but yourself. But consider me, I am an old man of sixty. For more than ten years I have been pensioned; at eight I entered the army as a cadet. I have therefore worn the soldier's uniform for over forty years, and during the whole time I have exercised and drilled recruits, done my duty on parade, taken part in three campaigns. And what is the result of it all? To be dismissed with a pension on which one cannot live if he has a wife and child. Pensioned off with four thousand marks. I ask you, what are four thousand marks to-day? Now, things are said to be better, the pensions are to be increased—well, let us say there is an addition of one thousand five hundred marks—it won't in any case be more, probably not so much. What then?

Even six thousand marks are not sufficient to defray the household expenses of a family, are they? In a little town, perhaps, if one lives extremely modestly. But has one grown old, has one worn out one's bones for years in peace and in war, in order that in one's old age one must suffer one deprivation after another merely to prolong life? There is an old saying that the sweets of youth are not a good preparation for the black bread of old age. And we pensioned officers in our youth tasted mostly nothing but sweets. Certainly there were notable exceptions who managed on their [Pg 184] allowance, who were economical and sober, but most lived in a happy-go-lucky fashion and enjoyed all the pleasures that were offered them. And what a position one enjoyed then, how one was *fêted*! From one family to another, one dinner to another. They always gave us the best of everything, overwhelmed us with attentions, literally begged and entreated for our favour. And how well and luxuriously we lived at the Casino. We ordered what we wanted, and if we had no money we ran into debt. Then after this youth of amusement and gaiety comes sorrowful old age, in which one has nothing whatever to do, though that is not the worst part of it. Two things make old age unbearable; money anxieties and the position to which we are relegated. Who are we nowadays? Mere nobodies! The stupidest young lieutenant plays a far more important part than we. We are on the shelf, no attention is paid to us; we are either regarded as ridiculous figures or, at any rate, as objects of pity. And so after we have done our duty for years we can retire to some miserable little hole where we are bored to death or starve. For you can't imagine, my boy, the way in which the pensioned officers and their families live here, and, of course, it is the same in every *pensionopolis*. There is a groaning and a gnashing of teeth of which none but the initiated have any idea. How few of them [Pg 185] ever have any opportunity of earning a few pence? People are apt to avoid the pensioned officer, not entirely without justification, and when he does try to get a post, how much can he earn as an agent or traveller for wine? It is a miserable life, a dog's life. Pour me out some more wine, my boy, pass me the glorious wine; we must gild the grey day, glorify it with wine."

Father and son clinked glasses and emptied them at a draught. Then Fritz said:

"You may be quite right in what you say, father, but how can things be altered? It has always been like this, and I suppose it always will be."

"Yes, as long as the officer plays the important part in Society that he does to-day."

Fritz looked up astonished.

"Do you then, as an officer, wish that it should be otherwise?"

"In many ways, certainly. Do not misunderstand me. I am far from wishing that the position of the officer should be lowered. In my opinion he must and ought to remain in the view of the public what he is to-day—a man belonging to the highest class of Society. That is necessary if we desire to maintain our army in the highest efficiency, as it still is—although for a long time things have not been as they ought to be—as it must be, and as it could be; but these eternal inspections, the fear of [Pg 186] dismissal and the struggle for mere existence no longer permit of the careful military training of our troops. However, that is another story." Turning to his son: "Give me another glass of wine, these long speeches make me thirsty, but I must relieve myself once for all of what I have on my mind."

Then, drinking off the contents of his glass at a draught, he continued:

"Well now, my boy, aristocratic men should really form the highest caste in the land, but to do this they must be far more exclusive than they are to-day. People are always talking about the caste feeling of the officers, and it is solemnly trotted out when it is a question of excluding unwelcome elements from the officers' corps, or when an officer strikes a civilian with his sword, or whenever an officer fights a duel with a comrade or anyone else. When the cry is raised against them by the other classes the officers always defend themselves with, 'Remember we belong to the highest caste; we have our own sense of honour, which you cannot understand; our thoughts are not your thoughts, nor yours ours, God be thanked!'

"But how are things really with this highest caste? If they had their own special instincts and characteristics, their own ideas of honour, then they would not only *appear* 'first class,' they really would be *it*. They ought to remember the Emperor's [Pg 187] words: 'The best society for the officer is that of the officer.' But it is just this idea that you all object to, and now I am coming to what I wanted to say. Consider for a moment the society of the modern officer—I am not here referring to low-class society—he has far too much of it; people run after the lieutenants, everybody who has a house invites you officers, and what do you do? You accept every invitation when there is nothing actually against the host which makes social intercourse in his house an absolute impossibility, and of course that is rare. Wherever there is the attraction of a dinner, a supper, an entertainment of any kind, where the food is good and the drinks plentiful, there the officers are to be found, and it is solely for the sake of the excellent fare that they visit these people with whom they would not dream of sitting down to dinner if they were not rich. To-day, alas! money in the eyes of the officers ennobles. That proud sense of honour which the highest class ought to have should not judge a man according as he is rich or poor, but solely as he is an honourable man. I have often enough noticed how even the old officers bow down to money, how they try to win the favour of the rich, how they give themselves endless trouble to get introduced into a family where a good dinner and a rich daughter is the attraction. Naturally, if an officer behaves in this way he lowers himself in the eyes of other people and arouses the contempt and derision of all thoughtful men ——"

[Pg 188] "But, father——" interrupted the son.

"Let me finish first what I have to say. If you have any right feeling you must agree with me in what I have already said. But the chief reason why the social condition of the officers must be altered is, that owing to the present state of affairs the officer no longer takes a pride and a joy in his military duties, and is forced into a quite false mode of living. If he goes night after night to balls can he next day be fresh for his duties? and if he daily swallows oysters and champagne at other people's houses, naturally he does not live at the Casino and in his own home as economically and as simply as he ought if he is to manage on his money and contract no debts. He ought in these ways to act as a shining example to other people, and be in reality, and show that he is really, a first-class man. I do not entirely blame the lieutenants, but Society, and, above all, the military authorities. These, in my view, ought to forbid their officers to go into Society so tremendously. Their warnings not to live beyond their means are not enough, and likewise, it is not much use to read out from time to time the stringent Cabinet Order: 'In order to decrease the love of luxury and pleasure it becomes the officers to give a good example by their economical and upright mode of life,' or some such words. The officers might assert [Pg 189] that they are economical in the Casino, but then it is the rarest thing for an officer to be ruined by his actual extravagance in barracks. It is Society that is answerable for the lieutenants, Society which imbues him with the idea, the crazy idea I might say, that he is a creature specially favoured by the Almighty, who instil into him the poison of 'You are quite different from every one else.' Society drives him into making debts and living gaily upon them, just as the rich do. When you are an old pensioned officer as I am, without money or position, you will see and understand how Society sins against you by spoiling you in this way. Yes, and when one is a young lieutenant one is foolish enough to believe that all these invitations are meant as an honour to oneself personally, instead of, as it really is, to the officer's uniform."

"That's not always so," interrupted his son.

"Always, as far as lieutenants are concerned, I bet you any amount. It is well known to you that the late Emperor Frederick had signed a Cabinet Order commanding his officers to wear uniform only when on duty; on other occasions they were to appear in civilian dress. I will not criticise in any way this Imperial command, which is not yet in force, but if it were in force, one thing I can tell you—with one stroke it would have robbed the lieutenants of their social importance. The young girls would be bitterly disappointed, and the Enfeld Hussars would not then be in [Pg 190] such great request. Now, after what I have told you, do you not see that the carrying out of this order would have been for the benefit of the officers in many ways?"

Fritz had been listening to his father with astonishment, and now he said: "But what sort of a life do you think we ought to live? Without amusements or social intercourse we could not exist, we should grow stupid and dull."

"Don't you imagine it, my boy," laughed the old man. "Confess, honestly, do you ever talk about anything sensible at these entertainments? You speak, and that is all, you whisper sweet words, or talk gossip to one another, but have you ever talked about one serious subject at any place where you have been to? You could not indeed do that, for you are far too stupid. Don't be offended at my harsh words, but I am quite right in what I say. No one, however, ought to reproach you with your stupidity. The majority of officers have been cadets, and what do you learn in the army? Drill, riding, how to judge a horse, manners and behaviour, but what else? What is added in the way of knowledge is not worth talking about, but it's considered quite sufficient for an officer. I have been in the army and I can tell you that I have often felt horribly, horribly ashamed when I saw how little I knew that an educated man ought to know. It is the rarest thing in the world nowadays for a young officer to go [Pg 191] on with his education. If he ever does study it's simply military subjects, and except for this he is only too delighted when his duties are over to take his ease or to fill himself with alcohol, and I must say the last occupation is by no means the worst. Pass along the wine, my boy," and again the glasses clinked.

"Let me see, what was I just saying?" asked the major. "Oh, yes, I remember. Well, you see, your intellectual education ought not to be of a kind to make you long to go to entertainments and festivities; on the contrary, if you were better educated you would feel how boring it is to dine to-day at the Mullers, to-morrow at the Schulzes, and to dance about with young girls; you could easily dispense with the *conversation*, I'll be bound, but not with the dinners and the girls."

"But what do you want, then, father? I really don't understand you. Almost every week one reads in the papers of some scandal or other that has taken place in a little garrison town. Either two drunken lieutenants have boxed each other's ears, or have carried on with each other's wives, or there is some other addition to the *Chronique Scandaleuse*. And as excuse it is always said, with complete justice: 'The men there have nothing but the public-houses to go to, they ruin morals; if they had the society which their brother officers enjoy in the large towns these things would not happen.' [Pg 192] We should simply die if we couldn't go to these little entertainments, and now you want to deprive us of them."

"I was not meaning that, I only want to alter them, to make them simpler, to reorganise the whole thing. To-day, when two lieutenants meet on duty in the morning, and one tells the other that yesterday he dined with such and such a man of wealth, the other asks, with deadly seriousness: 'Does he give one decent things to eat?' Then the first speaker, who is otherwise very proud of the fact that, owing to mental stupidity, he cannot learn anything by heart, rattles off the long *menu*, together with the names of the various wines! If an old staff-officer who knows how to judge good wine did this I should not object—the man has a right, I might almost say a sacred duty, to recognise with gratitude what the Almighty allows him to have in the shape of excellent wine—but when a lieutenant of twenty does this it is nothing but a vice to boast of. When people are young they ought not to think about what is put before them, they ought not indeed to know anything about it, but they are unfortunately being educated into *gourmands* and *gourmets*. Whenever a lieutenant is invited to dinner the lady of the house wrings her hands and says: 'We must not give this and that, it's not good enough; and if we don't give these fine gentlemen good things to eat they won't come here again, they are so dreadfully spoiled nowadays.'"

[Pg 193] "It is, as you know, the universal custom to invite captains or staff-officers to dinner, lieutenants only to balls, but is the supper after a ball anything else but a dinner served later in the evening? There are caviare, lobster salads, pasties of goose-liver—I know the whole list—and one bottle of champagne follows the other, and that is the folly. No, not the folly, but the wickedness which Society commits against the young officers; you are so terribly spoiled that you become firmly convinced that a luxurious life is the only life; you see it everywhere, in every house you go into, and it is, therefore, not to be wondered at if you get false ideas."

"But how do you propose to alter Society?"

"In this way: In future it should not be simply a question of eating and drinking; the lieutenants should really have society; not only a huge supper. But, above all, in future the young lieutenant must be treated as a human being, not as a little god. He must understand that people do not stand on tremendous ceremony with him and involve themselves in expense on his behalf; he must be made to feel that he is nothing but a young man of good family.

"People must not overwhelm him with flattery; he must, of course, be treated politely and cordially as any other guest would be, but he must not always take the first place. When Society makes up its mind to do this then the lieutenant will [Pg 194] become once more what he ought to be, but what, alas! he no longer is. His foolish self-complacency will vanish, he will again perform his duties with enthusiasm and delight; again will he live simply and economically, and he will then be no longer ashamed to confess, openly and honourably: 'My means do not allow me to do such and such a thing.' He will no longer run up debts, nor gamble, and the number of men who are ruined by their profligate lives will be speedily decreased. And when later he drops the uniform he will not long for the flesh-pots of Egypt as the present generation do; he will know how to live on his income, and then if, during his years of active service he were not worshipped as a second golden calf, he could endure to play an unimportant part when he retires on a pension. And the one thing more: If when he is an officer he understands clearly that he is not superior to other people, then when he takes his discharge he will not be ashamed and afraid of working, nor of adding to his somewhat limited stock of knowledge in order to get some appointment or other which will enable him to support himself and his family. He will consider it more honourable to live on money which he had honestly earned than on credit, or by running into debt."

Fritz looked at his father in great astonishment. "But what makes you take these views?"

"Why do I take them? I have always had them, though perhaps I have not always [Pg 195] lived in accordance with them. You know what a situation I am in, and naturally enough I often ask myself who is to blame for it. I have thought long and much on the subject, and I have come to the conclusion: it is Society that spoils us utterly as it is now spoiling you, and then casts us aside as valueless directly we no longer wear the dazzling uniform. Society means well, but without wishing to do so it commits more sins against the lieutenants than it can answer for, and from this point of view His

Majesty was perfectly right when he made the remark I have already referred to: 'The best society for the officer is the society of the officer.' I know this, that if ever I had been the colonel and commander of a regiment I should have said to my officers: 'Gentlemen, you must give up going all over the place wherever a smoking dish awaits you; I will give you a list of the families where you can visit.' I should have only chosen those where my officers could have had, first of all, nice, pleasant, friendly, social intercourse, and, secondly, quite simple suppers. Of course, as you can imagine, my son, the officers would have at first cursed and sworn, but later they would have been grateful to me. Bismarck used to say: 'Other nations can imitate everything we possess except the Prussian lieutenant.' The old statesman was right when he spoke. Would he be equally right to-day, I wonder?"

"But, father——"

[Pg 196] "Don't interrupt, my boy," laughed the old major; "you are my dearly-loved son, and my joy, but would you maintain that you are the model Prussian lieutenant whom Bismarck praised?"

"Well, no, not exactly that," admitted Fritz, yielding, "but still——"

"Now be a good fellow, don't defend yourself any further. It's high time, moreover, for us to stop talking. I must have my afternoon nap. At six o'clock I am going to the club. Will you come with me?"

"Of course, Dad."

"Very well, then, good-bye for the present," and the old man went into his room.

It was not till supper that the family were all together again, and the men folk were late in coming. They had stayed longer than usual at the club, the members of which were retired officers who day after day argued and disputed concerning their dismissal and the advancement of their comrades who, according to their firm conviction, ought to have been retired far earlier than they. Fritz's appearance aroused quite a sensation in the little circle; they were delighted to see at lunch once again a lieutenant on active service, even though he was in mufti, and they were suddenly of the opinion that the ordinary sour Moselle was not at all a suitable beverage for the occasion. They ordered a better brand and chatted gaily over it.

[Pg 197] The major and his son were somewhat silent at supper; the mother told all about the visits she had paid with Hildegarde, and as her husband was in an amiable frame of mind she thought this would be a favourable moment for him to bear the disappointment of learning that the Warnows had only sent him six thousand marks. So she told him about it, and also that she had changed the cheque in the bank.

"Well, it's not much, certainly, but it's something," averred the major. "Let me have the money."

His wife objected. "Let me keep it till to-morrow, then we will talk over things quietly and consider whom we must pay."

"Paying is all very well," said Fritz, "but surely you wouldn't be so stupid, now that you have a few pence in your pockets, to fling them away again. If you pay one person all the others will come running to the house to-morrow, in honour of the Dad's birthday. Whoever would be so stupid as to pay debts?"

His father quite agreed with him. "Fritz is right, Fritz is a sensible fellow. The crew have waited all this time for their money and can certainly wait a few weeks longer until Hilda is engaged. To your health, Hilda!"

Fritz also raised his glass. "Long life to your future husband! By the way what's his name? Not that it matters; the thing is, he has money."

[Pg 198] But Hildegarde did not lift her glass, she would like to have got up from the table, she could not bear the way they talked about her, and she could hardly refrain from bursting into tears. What would George think if he knew how they drank his health and how they only thought of his money and not of himself?

"Well, if you won't drink with us, leave it alone," said Fritz, and emptied his glass.

The major returned to the subject of the money. "My dear, with that money we might really have a nice little holiday; for three years we have not stirred from this miserable hole. We would leave two thousand marks at home, so that when we returned we were not penniless, and the rest we would take with us and go for a few weeks to Italy."

The idea was very agreeable to his wife, but she said, however, "Later, perhaps, when Hilda is engaged. Remember the engagement may take place any day, and we must be here to receive the dear man with open arms."

"We will do that, certainly," said the major, "we'll embrace him. He will be astonished how affectionately we hold him, won't he, Fritz?" And turning to his wife he went on: "Just imagine, mother, that rogue Fritz is forty thousand marks in debt." And he burst out laughing at his son.

His mother clasped her hands, horrified. "But Fritz, how is that possible?"

[Pg 199] And, Hildegarde, astounded, burst out: "What on earth do you do with the money from home that uncle sends you?"

"'Ask the stars that all things know,'" Fritz began to hum, but he could not recollect the tune, so he only hummed a couple of inarticulate notes.

It was long before his mother recovered her composure. "It is really frightful; it is to be hoped that Hildegarde's *fiancé* will pay your debts also later. But supposing he doesn't, what are you going to do?"

"Shoot myself. But he'll soon pay up, I'll see to that all right."

"If you only had been something else but an officer," lamented his mother; "it's madness for a man who has no money to enter the army."

"I quite agree with you," said Fritz; "but what's the use of lamenting? It's too late now, you should have thought of that before, when you sent me to the Military College. I wasn't asked."

"You are quite right. The rascal is reproaching us now," laughed his father.

"I didn't mean that at all, father. I have a very good time as a lieutenant; besides, I don't know what else I could have been. But you know, being a lieutenant has its drawbacks; one is never free from money difficulties, and then there is the constant [Pg 200] fear of getting one's discharge much earlier than one expects. It's a horrible feeling. I really can't understand why fathers let their sons go into the army, and least of all can I understand why retired officers always do it. The old officers, you, father, most of all, and those whom I met to-day at the club, are always complaining of the injustice of being pensioned off so early; they lament that the army is no longer what it once was; they groan over their tiny pensions and their bodily ills, the results of long years of campaigning; they swear at the allowance they are obliged to make their sons. They know perfectly well, however, that he cannot manage on it, and that he, therefore, contracts debts; they know that, at best, their son will only be a staff-officer, and that then till his death he will lead the same miserable, embittered life as they have. And alas: they also know how a mistake on duty, a mis-spent evening, an impulsive blow may ruin a young soldier, and although they know all this they let him become a soldier. And when one day the young officer is at the end of his tether and has to leave the army, then there is lamentation and grieving, and, of course, no one is to blame but the son."

"Everybody wouldn't find things as bad as you do," interposed the major.

"You are right, but I am not speaking about myself, but of things in general. In my regiment it happens we are nearly all the sons of retired officers and I am constantly [Pg 201] hearing one or other of them complaining: 'Why on earth didn't my father let me be something else, as he must know I can't possibly manage on the small allowance he gives me?' Why do these old officers always send their sons to a military college in spite of all there is against it? Because it is cheap, and it is so very convenient to get the young rascals educated in that way. Do you suppose that in the future the retired officers would take it quite so much as a matter of course that their sons should go into the army if they had to pay four or five hundred marks a year at college instead of eighty, besides providing them with clothes? They would not think any more about it. But now it's a simple matter: 'Let the boy be educated cheaply, that's the thing, we can attend to other things later on.' Privately they always reckon upon an old uncle or aunt, and when one day they 'strike' or die, then the lieutenant is in a fix and gets into debt, or he is expected to live upon air. People always talk about the foolish lieutenants, but what about the foolish parents who, to save themselves the expense of educating them, let them adopt a profession in which it is impossible to earn any money and the temptation to spend it is tremendous."

"Very well delivered," said his father; "but if the officer has no money to get his son properly educated, as was the case with me, what is he to become?"

[Pg 202] "Fritz ought to have been put into business," declared Hildegarde. "If a man has no means he should choose a career in which he can make money."

"In theory that is very beautiful and quite true," answered Fritz; "and if many fathers were as wise as you, my charming sister, it would be better for our officers. These first-class men, as father called them a little while ago, would not run around and beg and borrow and get credit, and try their luck at cards in order to try and keep their heads above water until they find a rich wife or are ruined."

The major had listened to his son very attentively, now he said: "I am astonished that you, an officer's son, should talk in this way. Who, according to your theory, should supply the army with officers if not we?"

"First of all, only those parents who have the financial means to provide for their sons' future; and then no one ought to be made an officer unless he has real enthusiasm and love for his profession and is willing, if need be, to make sacrifices and bear deprivations for its sake. But you cannot expect that a kid who is sent to a college at eight should know if he has any real liking for the work of a soldier. He ought not to choose a profession until he is able to judge for himself to a certain extent; a father ought not to send his son into the army from motives of economy, or [Pg 203] God knows what other reasons, and then demand of him that he should be a model of steadiness and conscientiousness. I know that if I had anything to say in the matter I should abolish the Cadet Colleges."

"Ho! ho!" burst out the major, "you are becoming worse and worse."

"It will have to be," continued Fritz. "You yourself pointed out to me a little while ago that we do not learn nearly enough at college, but quite apart from that there is another drawback; we go into the army too young, we are made officers in two years. Lieutenants of eighteen and nineteen are by no means rare, and we are suddenly given a position which no one else enjoys at that age. We get the control of money too early without ever having learnt how to manage it. Just think of the life at a military college, how we are watched and protected! One dare not smoke or drink beer or go out without being invited. One has to say how long one stayed with one's relatives——"

"But that is all very right," interposed Hildegarde.

"It may be, but it may not be: the transition to the other kind of life is too sudden, too quick. Twenty-four hours after one has left this college one is an ensign, and then all at once he enjoys that complete liberty against which he was so zealously guarded but a short time ago. One can eat and drink what one likes, one can go where one [Pg 204] will, in short, one can enjoy all the pleasures of life at one go off. And so one easily oversteps the limits and does all sorts of stupid things in the joy of having escaped such strict surveillance. And who can blame an ensign for this? The young ensign gets accustomed to leading an idle life, and this continues when he becomes a lieutenant, only very few having the energy to alter. We were lately looking over the Army List to see how many of our contemporaries at college were still in the army, and we were simply astonished to find how many had vanished. The education at the Cadets' College is answerable for this—that alone. At nineteen a man is an officer, at three-and-twenty he gets his discharge; that happens more often than people believe, and that shows clearly that the cadets at college have not learnt the one thing properly that they ought to have learnt—to control themselves and to live as officers in a suitable manner. At college far too much stress is laid upon drill, exercise, lessons and other things, and not nearly enough on the education of the youthful mind. There is no education of the individual, of the character; it's all done *en bloc*, and the college can never take the place of the home; what the child sees and hears and learns unconsciously there, is worth a thousand times more than what is so stringently imparted to him at college."

"But how can it be altered?" asked the major, who was deeply interested in the [Pg 205] conversation. The ladies, meanwhile, had risen from the table and taken their needlework.

"I do not know," acknowledged Fritz, "but some means may be found. The Cadets' Colleges must, as I have said, be abolished, and every officer must have passed his matriculation, as was formerly the case in the Marines. There should be a limit of age; in my opinion it should be twenty, and then a man could not be a lieutenant till he was two-and-twenty; that is quite early enough, if after that age was no more taken into account. The age limit must be abolished. To-day no one who has not reached a certain rank by a certain age has any chance of making a career for himself. What is the object of keeping the army so young by all possible means? As a result of this, every year hundreds and hundreds of men have to seek for posts of all kinds. New elements, new officials, new views are introduced, and this does not tend to facilitate the training of the troops. If a man is lieutenant at twenty-two he can be a captain at five-and-thirty, a major at forty-four, and a colonel at eight-and-forty. Surely that is young enough, isn't it? And if he distinguishes himself in any way he can get his promotion earlier."

"And would that make for efficiency in time of war?"

"You can answer that better than I can. You were pensioned as a complete invalid, [Pg 206] but in spite of this were you not at your discharge quite young enough and active enough to have done duty on the field?"

"Yes, and no," grumbled the major. "I will explain what I mean. The chief army doctor worried round me for a long time, but he could find no wound for which he could write a certificate, so I assisted him a little and mentioned injuries which I did not possess, and then it was all right. But I could easily have held out for five—no, ten years. Go into a pension office in any large town and look at the innumerable officers who go there regularly at the first of each month to draw their pension—a few miserable pounds. They are all 'complete invalids,' or who have been pensioned on account of their age. Yet health and energy are to be read in their faces."

"That is just what we all say," put in Fritz. "We have been lately talking about these things in the Casino; nothing of much value is said, still it is interesting what the different officers think about these matters. We are unanimous in wanting to abolish the military college. Every lieutenant must have passed his matriculation and no one can be an officer before he is one-and-twenty; if we once have that, there will be a great alteration in the army."

There was a long pause; the major was ruminating over what Fritz had just said, then he said: "In many ways you have really most sensible ideas."

[Pg 207] "That is what I think," Hildegarde chimed in; "I must compliment you, Fritz. When I hear you speak so seriously, and with so much knowledge, I can hardly recognise you as my gay and frivolous brother."

Fritz bowed to his sister. "Very much obliged. Yes, I have at intervals my lucid moments, they tell me that in the regiment; but, alas! these mental illuminations are but rare. My mental darkness only disappears when I have drunk a good deal of wine; then I begin to think. I haven't courage at other times. From such occasions I recognise that I am a social democrat."

"But, Fritz——"

"Well, that *is* good! You a lieutenant and a social democrat——"

"Calm yourselves," implored Fritz. "I have not sworn brotherhood with Bebel. When I say I am a social democrat I don't, of course, mean that I have subscribed to the programme of that party, though I must say the division of property would suit me well, provided I got a good thing out of it! I only meant to say that I am a dissatisfied aristocrat, and so are we all, from the colonel down to the youngest lieutenant. One can't say as much as one would like to, because naturally one has to remember the uniform one wears, but soon there will be complaints enough, I can assure you, not only in our regiment but in all."

[Pg 208] "It was certainly not like that in my time," lamented the major; "discussions we had often, of course, but——"

"Formerly things were very different, father. Formerly everybody got his majority, now one may remain a first lieutenant for ever and be transferred to a district command or some such thing. Formerly it really was a day of honour and rejoicing when there was an inspection by those high in authority, but what happens now? Everybody trembles for weeks before it takes place, and for weeks afterwards, in the fear that someone may get his discharge as a result of it. There used to be a three-years' service, now the men have to get through the same amount of work and drill in two years, and the military and extra-military duties of to-day are not to be compared with those of ten years ago. Ah, and the money question! I am not thinking of myself, I am an extravagant dog, but now and again someone attempts to live on his allowance and the authorities do all they can to put obstacles in his way. Now it's a festival, now a guests' day, a birthday celebration, a garden entertainment and ladies invited, the jubilee of the regiment, a farewell dinner; even if a man wants to be steady and economical he can't get out of the champagne—he simply must drink with the others. Whether in former times you used so much of your pay for presents,
[Pg 209] flowers, Casino subscriptions, and a thousand and one other things, that I don't know. And then, the expense of one's clothes; why, I believe I owe my tailor alone five thousand marks. There's always some new fashion or other; new cloaks, different caps, coats, new buttons, new scarves, and all the rest of it. And who has to pay for all this? Why, the officer, of course. And where does he get his money from? Of course that's his own business. On the one hand we are warned to be steady and not fling away our money, and on the other we are always being dragged into fresh expenses. It will all have to be altered, or in ten years' time our officers will be ten times more heavily in debt than even to-day. You, father, to-day were blaming Society because we lived beyond our means, but we officers blame the authorities. There must always be money for regimental purposes, but nobody troubles how we live, and then when we get into debt there's a devil of a row and we are bound to pay up within three days. On such occasions we are threatened with dismissal, of which the colonel also runs the risk because he was not strict enough in preventing us from getting into debt. That is what happened to me lately. I owed the Casino four hundred marks, and had to face the alternative of paying within four-and-twenty hours or undergoing five days' arrest; naturally I paid, and the colonel was satisfied. It didn't occur to him to ask where I had got the money from."

[Pg 210] "And where did you get it from?"

"Borrowed it from the Jews, of course. I am not a magician and cannot get money from the air. It's so ridiculous. One is forced to contract new debts in order to pay off the old ones which comes to the colonel's ears."

"Does your colonel know that you have debts?"

"Of course he knows, though, probably, he does not guess how deeply I am involved. He says to himself, 'What I do not know does not concern me. I need not trouble about things which are not officially brought to my notice.' His own future and his career are of far more importance to him than mine. He doesn't really care if I go to the devil or not; but if I do go he may go also; so he not only shuts both eyes, but also both ears. He doesn't want to see or hear anything, for, of course, he knows perfectly well that I am not the only one. If he takes action against one, he would have to against the others, and he doesn't want to do that. He wants to become a general; his successor can see about the officers who are in debt."

It was late when they went to bed. The father and son would have preferred to go on talking all through the night, but the women folk urged an adjournment; they must remember to-morrow was the day of the festivity which would bring in its train a great deal of exertion, visits, and congratulations of all kinds.

[Pg 211] But, alas! the day of rejoicing was not such as had been expected. It got about that Hildegarde had changed a cheque in her father's name, and the news spread like lightning through the little town. Everybody who knew of this and had any claim on the major determined to go early in the morning, if possible, so as to be the first, and ask him to pay his account which had been owing for ages.

They were taking their early cup of coffee when the tradesmen were announced. The major knew what was before him and cursed and swore like mad.

"That's what happens when you women interfere in money matters. How could you be so stupid as to change a cheque, even if only one person was standing by and saw you? And why was it a cheque at all? Can't the Warnows pay the miserable few thousands (hundreds) in cash? Nobody would then have heard of it; but now I am obliged to pay out some of the money. But," he roared out suddenly, "I won't do it at all. I did not think to have my sixtieth birthday spoilt by that shameless crew. I'll see them all to the devil first."

"Shall I go and talk to these people?" asked Fritz. "I have great experience in these things, and I can safely say that no one has ever got anything from me. I can't understand, father, why you get so excited over such trifles. Now, let me go and try what I can do."

[Pg 212] He was about to go out of the room, but his mother kept him back.

"That won't do, Fritz. You don't know how often the bailiff from the court has been here. Things have gone so far—I mean—well, you will have to know it—up till now he has only sealed some of our furniture and has not sold any; but if the authorities hear that we really have money he will have to sell us up. He told us that, and we wanted to spare papa that to-day."

"Above all things, certainly." Fritz had become serious, and involuntarily he looked round to see the seals.

"He has only put on seals where they could not be seen," the mother whispered to her son; "on the carpets, the piano, the bookshelf, the pictures—briefly, all the things that stand against the walls. Oh, it's frightful!" and she began to cry.

"Yes, that's right, cry!" roared the major. "Formerly on one's birthday one was serenaded; now, when one is old and grey, one's wife weeps because there is no money and the creditors are outside the door. A man must live to be sixty to enjoy such an honour."

He stamped to and fro cursing, listening from time to time to the people who were in the vestibule waiting for him. Suddenly he stood in front of Hildegarde and put his hand on her shoulder.

[Pg 213] "Eh, Hilda, you see we cannot wait much longer for your lover. Bring him soon, before it is too late, before that rascally crew has taken everything and sold us up and I and your mother are cast into the street."

His words expressed such bitterness and such despair that Hildegarde forgot all about her own feelings and how she was looked upon as deliverer, and in grief for her parents she burst into tears.

"Number two," scolded the major. "That's right."

"Don't be unjust, father. You can't blame mother and Hildegarde for being sad. The affair is more than unpleasant to me even."

"Then you had better begin and cry," cursed the old man, whose veins stood out on his forehead.

"I am not thinking of myself but how these people can be satisfied in some way or other. I did not know that any of the furniture was sealed. You ought to have told me so." After a slight pause he asked, "How much is it for?"

"Only two thousand marks."

"This must be paid first of all, and this very day."

"Oh, I don't think so. The seals have been all right there for a long time."

"In spite of that the two thousand marks must be paid," continued Fritz with [Pg 214] determination and energy, "and if you cannot pay it I must. I lately won a few thousands at cards, and I will give you a couple."

The major stared at his son. "And what is the reason of this generosity, may I ask?"

"Consideration for myself and Hildegarde. If it were conceivable that it should ever be known in my regiment how matters stood with you here, I should not only lose my position, but also my credit, and that might have consequences which would not be pleasant for either of us. And one must consider Hildegarde. Just imagine if in the next few weeks, or perhaps in the next few days, Hilda's prospective lover were to pay you a visit and by some unfortunate chance caught sight of the seals. The fellow would have to be a downright idiot if this did not open his eyes to the fact that he was only being married for his money. And this knowledge must not come before the marriage, it must be prevented at all cost. If you can't do this I must."

The major had sunk into a chair and was gazing gloomily in front of him, the two ladies were softly crying.

Fritz got up and went to his mother. "I will go and talk to these people. Will you give me the six thousand marks, it can't be helped."

"The dear money!" The major groaned; for the first time for many a day he had been able to sleep the whole night through without being awakened by anxious [Pg 215] thoughts. The consciousness of having six thousand marks in the house in cash had filled him with great joy and given him a feeling of tranquillity and security. And now the people stood outside who were to take his money from him.

"Fritz," he said, turning to his son, "you promise me to do the best you can with these people. Don't pay it all away or we shall not have any money in the house."

"I can manage with the housekeeping till the first," the mother said; "I have still a hundred marks."

"And I can give you another hundred, mamma," put in Hildegarde. "Aunt gave me more than I needed for travelling expenses."

"And I will contribute a hundred marks also," said Fritz. He had really no feeling for his family, but the poverty that reigned seemed to him so horribly unsuited to their social position he must give a helping hand, partly indeed on his own account, so as not to be the son of a beggar.

Fritz turned to the door once again. "You are quite sure you want me to talk to these people, father, or would you rather——"

But the major declined. "No, no, you go, I should get into a temper; do what you can."

Fritz went into the next room and summoned all the creditors who were standing outside. They were all workmen or tradesmen. All knew Fritz personally, and greeted [Pg 216] him in a friendly fashion and were very deferential in their behaviour.

In the regiment Fritz was regarded as excessively haughty and proud, but when he wanted to get anything out of a person he could be exceedingly amiable. He shook hands now with all, asked after the health of their families, and now and again joked with them. He had indeed already half won the battle when he said, "My father, who is not feeling very well to-day, has requested me to speak to you and to settle your accounts so far as he is in a position to do so. There are, indeed, rather a lot," he said laughingly, "but we shall be able to make an arrangement; naturally we cannot pay all at once. You know that in consequence of the failure of his bank my father has lost a great deal"—then he went on with his fabrications—"but within the next few months we shall get a large sum of money from the family estates, and then each of you will be paid to the uttermost farthing. To-day we can only pay part, and I am sure you will all agree to this. You know, perhaps, that to-day my father is celebrating his sixtieth birthday, and I am sure you would not wish to spoil the day when he might be so happy with his wife and children."

No, they did not want to do that; naturally they knew the money would be quite safe, only they had heard that yesterday the respected major had received a large [Pg 217] sum of money, and they only wanted to see if they could not secure a little of it.

Fritz listened to these words with joy; these people were much more sensible, and above all much more respectful than he had dared to hope; mentally he put aside a thousand marks for his parents. If he divided five thousand marks (£250) among these tradespeople they would be more than satisfied.

He had the bills given to him, and a joyful smile played on his lips when he added up the amounts; the whole lot amounted to only ten thousand marks (£500). "I shall save another thousand," he thought to himself; then he called up each one singly, spoke to him cheerfully and arranged things as he wanted. All declared that they were quite satisfied to have received a fourth of their accounts, the remainder to be paid within three months.

It was a good hour before Fritz had finished; from each he exacted a written statement that he would not press for money during the next few months nor send in any accounts. To keep the people in a good humour all this time he had given them wine and offered them cigars. They took the wine and with Fritz drank his father's health, but they did not venture to smoke in the presence of the honoured lieutenant and in the respected major's apartments.

At last they departed; Fritz shook hands with them once again, and with a friendly [Pg 218] word they all parted good friends. From the passage the laughter of the departing ones penetrated into the breakfast-room, where the others were awaiting the result of the interview.

Beaming with joy, Fritz returned and laid the two thousand marks on the table. "Well, father, I've rescued that for you; for the present they are all satisfied and for three months you have a respite. Before the time is up Hilda will long have been married, and even if she is only engaged I'll manage to get you the few pounds. I've done more difficult things than that. But one thing I should like to know, father: surely these few debts, amounting in all to ten thousand marks, didn't deprive you of your night's rest? I thought they would have been at least seventy or eighty thousand."

"I thought so too; perhaps there are a lot more. I never had the courage to add them all up."

"Unless one can pay them there's not much point in doing so," said Fritz, with indifference; then, partly out of curiosity, partly from real interest, he asked, "What other debts have you then, father?"

"All over the place; the bills are turning grey with age, and some indeed are really primeval."

"In that case a lot of them are no longer valid."

[Pg 219] "But Fritz," cried Hildegarde, "you surely wouldn't take advantage of that? The tradesmen must have their money."

"Very easy to say that, but where is it to come from?" objected the major. "I haven't any money—at any rate, not for the moment."

"Have you any bills or I O U's out?" inquired Fritz. "You must not be offended with me for asking you this, but I have been to a certain extent your business agent to-day. I should like to have a clear idea of how matters stand."

"No," his father assured him, "I have never given any of these, but I am indebted to all my friends; one for four thousand (£250), another three thousand (£150), a third a thousand (£50), and so on."

"Oh, well, you need not grow grey because of these; whoever lends money to a friend knows perfectly well in nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand he will not get it back again. And I really see absolutely no reason why you should be the exception. Whoever lent you money knew perfectly well he would not see it again."

"Yes, yes, that is all very well," grumbled the old major, "but the people only lent me the money because I told them of Hildegarde's prospective engagement."

"Father, really——" cried Hildegarde. She blushed crimson and was beside herself [Pg 220] with indignation. "It is not enough that you think and talk about nothing else but my possible engagement, but you must also tell strangers about it in order to get credit."

The mother laid her hand gently on her shoulder. "But, Hilda, you must not take it in that way; we only spoke about it to intimate friends."

The major also tried to calm her, but Hildegarde would not be pacified. "I cannot go out in the town any more, you have made it impossible for me here. Now I understand the veiled allusions of mamma's friends yesterday when they inquired so sympathetically after my health. I shall go away to-morrow; I will not stay here a day longer."

"This is certainly a delightful birthday celebration," snarled the major, and he struck the table a violent blow with his fist.

"Hildegarde will be all right again directly," said Fritz, "she's a sensible girl; naturally these money complications have upset her. This afternoon she will be her old self again. Now I must go and arrange matters with the bailiff or the champagne will not taste good."

But although by the afternoon the seals had been removed from the furniture the champagne somehow or other was not successful. A dark shadow lay over the house, and remained there, and when at last the major went to bed he had to confess that he had never spent so sad a birthday as the day when he reached the age of sixty.

[Pg 221]

CHAPTER VIII

The Wages of Sin

Little Willberg had shot himself!

There was sincere sorrow in the regiment at the loss of their comrade, who had been the universal favourite, yet, in spite of that, they could not forgive him for not having taken his discharge before taking his life. Twenty-four hours sooner or later could have made no difference to him; within that time he could have managed it. They could not understand why he had shown so little consideration for the regiment he had so dearly loved and of which he had always been so proud. The act of one officer affects the credit of all; Willberg understood that perfectly well, and he ought to have remembered that his suicide would cause all kinds of unpleasantness to the regiment.

This was the universal view, and how right it was was shown by the fact that the Berlin newspapers were full of little Willberg's death. An attempt had been made to hush up the affair, and at the request of the colonel, the adjutant, Count Wettborn, [Pg 222] had visited all the newspaper offices and requested that nothing might be published concerning the sad affair. The count had been to all except the two social democratic organs; he could not bring his mind to visiting them; and it was just these two newspapers that daily published fresh revelations concerning the life of the dead man. There came to light, indeed, more than had been feared. The "Golden Butterflies" were beside themselves with rage that all these things which, in their opinion, were nobody's concern but their own, should be published, and the worst of it was that from the history of the dead man's life people drew unfavourable conclusions concerning the spirit and mode of life of the "Golden Butterflies."

The "Golden Butterflies" were simply distracted; why should this thing have happened to them?—to them who were so proud and distinguished, and who possessed the reputation of being one of the most aristocratic of infantry regiments? And why, again, should it have been an officer belonging to the highest nobility who gave people the opportunity of criticising the regiment? The newspapers, of course, found this an excellent occasion for renewing their attacks on the aristocracy and declaring that the people with blue blood in their veins were not a whit better or more to be respected than those who had to be content with miserable red blood.

[Pg 223] But the worst of all was that what the newspapers reported, unfortunately, approached the truth. Willberg must have been living frightfully extravagantly, and he was mixed up in highly disreputable affairs. Much was revealed of which his fellow-officers had had no idea. The colonel went about in a state of great excitement, cursing and swearing. On the day after the sorrowful event there was a regular attack on the regimental bureau by people who had claims on Willberg, and who wanted to know who would settle them, and when after this nobody else was admitted to the barracks, there were showers of letters which disclosed more or less discreditable episodes in Willberg's life.

Why, oh why, should it have been an aristocrat who drew down upon the regiment such scandal and rebuke? Nobody said it aloud, but everybody thought the same thing. If only it had been Winkler instead of little Willberg who had shot himself, how satisfied they would have been; they could have struck an attitude and declared, with great pride, "You see, we nobles are the better men." But it was the aristocrat who was dead, and the plebeian was still alive!

None of the "Golden Butterflies" knew what it was that had so suddenly driven Willberg to death, and he had not left a letter or a line behind which gave the slightest clue to it.

As a matter of course the colonel inquired of his fellow-officers whether any of [Pg 224] them could give him any information, but the "Golden Butterflies" looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders. All of them knew of course that little Willberg had lost money at cards, but that had often happened, and why should he, therefore, have shot himself on this particular occasion rather than earlier? And this view was strengthened by the fact that the Uhlan, when questioned, had declared that Willberg had paid him his gaming debts shortly before his death. As a matter of fact this was not the truth; on the contrary, the Uhlan had emphatically reminded Willberg that the date for the payment of the debt had passed, and had admonished him that in affairs of this kind, which were designated debts of honour, etiquette demanded the most scrupulous punctuality. It was after this that Willberg shot himself, and although the Uhlan need hardly reproach himself with having driven a comrade to death, still he was very glad that the affair had not been made public.

On the day after the burial it occurred to the adjutant of the regiment to ask Willberg's man if he could give any information in the matter. But he could disclose nothing, although he was subjected to a formal examination; at last, however, he remembered something. "Now I recollect, sir, one evening I took a letter to Lieutenant Winkler, and my master waited at home for the answer, and when it did [Pg 225] come he was greatly agitated. I had never seen him before like this. I heard him walking up and down for hours, and next morning when I went to call him he had not been to bed at all, but was lying on the sofa asleep."

"Do you know what was in the letter you took to Lieutenant Winkler?"

He could give no information on this point, so he was dismissed, and the adjutant told the colonel what he had just learnt. The latter walked about in agitation.

"How long has Lieutenant Winkler been on furlough?"

The count consulted the calendar. "He has to announce his return to-morrow mid-day!"

"So much the better, otherwise I should have had to recall him by telegraph. The authorities ask for explicit details concerning Willberg's death. Till now I was confronted by a riddle; perhaps Winkler can throw some light on the subject."

George had already heard of Willberg's death while he was in Paris, and although at first the news had shocked him he could not pretend that he was deeply grieved. Almost hourly he had thanked Olga for having persuaded him to take this journey. He could not hide from himself that in spite of the best resolutions he would not have been able to meet Willberg calmly.

He had also told himself hourly that even when he returned he did not think he [Pg 226] could see him in cold blood, and thus to a certain extent he breathed more freely when he heard of Willberg's death, and he was almost grateful to Heaven for having spared him a future meeting. It was sad, of course, that Willberg had been obliged to take his life when he was still a young man, but as far as the army and the officers were concerned his death was no loss. He had dreaded meeting him again, but now he returned to the garrison quite cheerfully. Fourteen happy days lay behind him; Olga and he had thoroughly enjoyed themselves in beautiful Paris; his furlough had been a real time of refreshment, and he was quite pleased to return to his duties and his active life.

"The colonel desires that Lieutenant Winkler will speak to him to-morrow at eleven in the regimental bureau." For a moment George was somewhat alarmed. Could the colonel have found out that he had been in France, in Paris, without permission? Well, the punishment for that was not severe, at the worst a few day's confinement to one's own lodgings, which would not destroy the memory of the delightful days he had just enjoyed.

The first words, however, which the colonel addressed to him next morning showed him that his fears were groundless. He inquired how he had enjoyed the Riviera, and then he came at once to the point. He told him what Willberg's former [Pg 227] servant had said, and begged George to give him any further information he had. "Above all it is most important for me to know what was in the letter which Willberg sent you. Can you, and will you, give me information concerning this?"

George considered for a moment, then he said: "As I was not expressly pledged to keep silence I do not think I shall be committing an indiscretion if I tender an account of it."

"Have you still Willberg's letter?"

"No, sir; but I perfectly remember what it contained. Lieutenant von Willberg wrote to me that he had been gambling and required five thousand marks (£250) to settle a debt of honour. If he did not get the money by some means or other he said he should have to put a bullet through his head to vindicate his honour."

"This confounded gambling!" cursed the colonel. "Who will extirpate it root and branch?" After a slight pause he asked: "Did you give him the money?"

"No, sir."

"The gambling debt was paid by some other means," interposed Count Wettborn; "the colonel therefore need not have any anxiety about that matter."

The colonel breathed more freely. "Well, I am glad of that." Then he turned to George again: "You did not give him the money then? Might I ask why? Do not [Pg 228] misunderstand me; it is, of course, your own affair whether you lent Willberg the money or not; but I thought perhaps you would have given it him on this occasion. But perhaps you did not think he was serious in saying he would take his life?"

"I must confess that I did not think about it at all. I was just about to assist Lieutenant Willberg when I learnt something about him that made it quite impossible for me to do so."

"And what was that?"

The colonel and Count Wettborn looked at George expectantly.

"I can only answer in general terms, as I am pledged to silence."

"To the dead?"

"No, to a living person to whom I am indebted for my information." And after a pause he continued: "Just as I was about to send Lieutenant Willberg the money he asked for, I learned quite by chance that he had behaved to a young lady, who is intimately connected with me, in such a manner that any Court of Honour must have sentenced him to immediate dismissal in case the matter became public. From that moment I was no longer able to regard Lieutenant Willberg as an officer and a man of honour, and I only assist such."

The colonel was greatly disturbed by what George had said. The affair was extremely unpleasant to him, and who knew what else might come out? He would [Pg 229] have preferred not to have asked any more questions, but that would not do, so he said: "You know that it was your duty to inform the Court of Honour of the dishonourable acts of a fellow-officer which came to your ears."

"Yes, sir, I should certainly have done so in this case if I had not been obliged to consider the young lady, who would have been greatly compromised if I had laid information before the Court of Honour. I did not think I was justified in doing this; moreover, as I had been for so comparatively a short time in the regiment, I did not want to be the cause of an investigation before a Court of Honour of the conduct of a fellow-officer who was universally loved. I asked for leave of absence so that I might consider calmly whether I could justify my silence to myself and to my fellow-officers, and in my agitated state of mind I wanted to avoid Lieutenant Willberg. Although I have a considerable amount of self-control there would have been a quarrel between him and me, and a duel would have been unavoidable—provided, of course, that the judge of the Court of Honour considered that an honourable man could send Lieutenant Willberg a challenge."

"Lieutenant Winkler!" cried the colonel, astounded. "An officer in my regiment, belonging to one of the noblest families in the land, not fit to be challenged by a man of honour—pray consider what you are saying."

[Pg 230] "I am. Indeed, it is no pleasant matter to make these charges against a dead man who can no longer defend himself."

"Then why do you do so?"

"To show you that, as an honourable man, I could not have acted otherwise in refusing to give Willberg the money."

The words sounded so calm, so determined, yet so honourable and straightforward, that the colonel rose and shook hands with George. "I not only believe what you say, but I am absolutely convinced of it. So far as I can judge, you appear to have acted perfectly rightly, and I thank you for not having given information at once to the Court of Honour without having first considered the whole question calmly and quietly. It is never pleasant to hold an investigation on a fellow-officer, especially when, as in this case, a good deal of dirt would have been thrown about."

"Much more," George asserted, "than anyone would have believed possible."

"We will let the matter rest, then," the colonel decided. "Willberg has discharged his debts with his life, you are pledged to silence, so let the secret remain with us."

After a few more questions George was dismissed, and the colonel addressed the adjutant: "Eh, what do you say, my dear count?"

Count Wettborn went on polishing his eyeglass, then he gave forth his opinion. "I [Pg 231] cannot help saying it, my dear colonel, but in my opinion Winkler has behaved splendidly in the whole affair."

"That is exactly my opinion also, but it is a great piece of luck that he is pledged not to speak; the less said about the dead man the better for everybody. I can imagine how everybody in the brigade and squadron is asking how it is possible for Willberg to lead such a life without my knowing anything about it. Mark my words, count: if the details of this story were known it might cost us our posts, for you as well as I would be blamed—I, because I was not sufficiently acquainted with what was going on among the officers generally and with Willberg in particular. But it is quite impossible for me to concern myself about each individual officer and to notice whether he is living beyond his means or not. That is your work, my dear count; you ought to warn the younger officers when they are so extravagant and wild, and if your words are of no avail, then you ought to inform me, so that I could take steps against the gentlemen concerned."

The colonel was seriously agitated, he really feared he might be dismissed. While the newspapers were publishing striking articles concerning Lieutenant Willberg he was summoned to an audience with His Majesty, and His Majesty had shown himself so ungraciously disposed that the colonel had had a very bad quarter-of-an-hour. In [Pg 232] clear, plain language His Majesty had said: "I must make the colonels of my regiments answerable for what happens among the officers, and when such things take place as those that have just come to light, it is not only a dishonour for the regiment on which I have bestowed my special favour and patronage, but for the whole army."

The colonel could only offer as an excuse the fact that little Willberg had not only been able to deceive him but also all his fellow-officers, and this had somewhat modified His Majesty's anger. "But all the same it is a great scandal." The colonel was dismissed from his presence without a gracious word, and he trembled for his career, but the adjutant was able to console him. If the colonel was to have received his discharge he would have had it already, and now that the colonel had seen His Majesty it was a matter of perfect indifference what the brigades and divisions were saying. Nothing would now happen to either the colonel or himself; indeed, he could not have been made personally responsible for what had occurred. Still, he was very glad that George was pledged to silence. For otherwise many more things connected with the gambling might have come to light. It might, indeed, have cost him his post, that he, in the character of the adjutant of the regiment, had not merely permitted gambling in the Casino, but had to a certain extent participated in it. He was [Pg 233] therefore greatly relieved that the affair had blown over so easily, and he made up his mind on the next suitable occasion to put in a good word for George and to say to the officers, "Boys, Winkler's behaviour has been blameless; I do not, of course, wish to influence you in any way, but I ask you to consider whether in future you will not be on more friendly terms with him."

When next day, however, the count delivered his carefully-thought-out address to the officers he evoked no reciprocal feeling. Every one of them would have done what Winkler did—why then was there anything special in it? And as he could not say what he knew touching Willberg's honour one really could not judge whether the thing was so bad, and to bring charges against a man without giving proof was really not exactly the proper thing to do. Either he should have said all or nothing.

The officers continued talking in this way, and the count heard their criticisms with surprise and annoyance. At last he said very seriously: "Gentlemen, I can only repeat that, in the opinion of the colonel, and also in my own, Lieutenant Winkler has acted perfectly rightly. If you think that you have the slightest ground for complaint against him I can only assure you you are wrong, and I advise you most earnestly not to express to Winkler the views you have just uttered. There might be results that would not be agreeable to you. I beg you to pay attention to what I have said."

[Pg 234] The officers certainly did this, but the count's words did not help to alter their feeling against George. At first his presence had been merely inconvenient to them, now they began to hate him. It was more than disagreeable to them that it should be George, an "outsider," whom they had tried to keep at arm's length, who knew more of Willberg's life than they themselves did, who was aware of things touching the dead man's honour which the colonel asserted it would not be wise to publish. In their opinion he ought to have spoken to them in confidence; they would have been able to judge whether what Willberg had done was really so bad, and they would indeed have judged justly, though at the same time without harshness, as it concerned a man of their own class. Whatever had made the count talk in that way? In other words he had said: "You have all reason to thank Lieutenant Winkler, who went on furlough to avoid a meeting, and in consequence a duel with Lieutenant Willberg." That was good indeed. They, the aristocrats, were bound to thank the one and only *bourgeois* officer in the regiment. The thought alone maddened them. And, besides, who knew that George was really animated by such noble motives as he asserted when he took a holiday. Perhaps he had simply said to himself: "If I see him there will be a duel"; and so he had gone for a holiday, feeling assured that he would [Pg 235] never meet Willberg again alive. He had avoided the duel merely from cowardice; he had "funked," and should such an officer be allowed to remain in the regiment?

The more the officers talked over the matter the more enraged and angry they became, and the wine which on such occasions was freely passed round, increased their excitement.

"We must send a deputation to the colonel and inform him that we decline to remain any longer in the same corps with Winkler. Either he or we!" cried out a hoarse voice.

But the sensible ones among them counselled discretion; things were not so bad as that. Everybody knew that His Majesty protected him, and if he heard what was the feeling about Winkler, and how they had determined not to remain in the same regiment with him, His Majesty would be seriously angry, especially as recently His Majesty had not been so well disposed towards the regiment as in former days. They must first of all let the grass grow on Willberg's grave; after that they could deal with

George. For the present there was nothing further to be done than to show him still more clearly than ever that he was not welcome among the officers; perhaps he himself would see about getting his exchange, and if he, a *bourgeois*, was not delicate-minded enough to see this, it would have to be conveyed to him by some means.

George soon noticed the feeling that existed towards him; they all treated him [Pg 236] with icy politeness, only spoke to him when it was absolutely unavoidable, and answered his questions as shortly as possible.

For a fortnight George endured this treatment, then he went to the adjutant of the regiment, the only one who during the whole time had treated him as a friend and a comrade.

"I knew that you would come to me," said the count. "I have done all in my power to remove the ill-feeling which exists against you among the officers. I have spoken on your behalf, and have warned them not to drive you to extremes, but, unfortunately, without success. There is no need to tell you that most of them blame you for your behaviour in the Willberg affair; they knew that he asked you for money, and they blame you for not having given it him. They think that if you had done so, Willberg would not have taken his life. Whether your money would really have saved him—his gambling debts were paid it must be remembered—or whether there were other things that forced him to take his life, only Willberg himself could say, and his mouth is closed for ever. I have endeavoured to make this clear to the officers, but in this likewise I have been unsuccessful. Besides, they appear to have all sorts of other things against you."

George sat opposite the adjutant pale as death. "So that's it. I always thought so, but I did not expect quite such heavy charges. What can I do?"

[Pg 237] "I have already spoken to the colonel. The best thing would be for you to demand an official inquiry before the Court of Honour for yourself, but there is—I was almost going to say 'alas!'—not the slightest ground for this. Perhaps the feeling against you would alter if you could inform the colonel and myself what you heard at the last moment about Willberg, what prevented you from helping him, and what ground you had for bringing such heavy charges against him. Cannot you tell me? If you like I will preserve absolute silence, though of course it would be best if everyone knew about it."

"I had permission to inform you of what I learnt on that day whenever I considered it absolutely necessary. I believe that now, for my own sake, I ought no longer to remain silent." And then he related what Olga had confided to him.

The adjutant listened with great attention, and when George had finished he sat silent for a long time.

"May I ask your opinion on the matter, sir?"

The count continued silent, then he jumped up suddenly. "Ach, how beastly!" He shook his head with disgust, and once more repeated "How beastly!"

George had been conscious from the beginning of having acted rightly, but now he breathed more freely and said, "Then you can understand why I did not give him the money?"

[Pg 238] The count turned to him quickly. "Understand? Why, it was a matter of course that yon——" he tried to find a name for Willberg—"what I mean is, you could not, of course, help him under the circumstances, and everyone will be of the same opinion. I sympathise with you and the young lady; it would be extremely painful for you if the story were known, but there would be no need to give any name."

"I am not sure that I have the right to ask you to inform the colonel of what I have just told you, but I will be responsible for that. Perhaps he will speak to the officers and tell them that he knows everything and approves of my conduct. Perhaps that will have the desired result."

"It must; I will ask the colonel to talk seriously to the officers, and if they will not listen to reason of their own free will they must be forced to hear it."

"Thank you, sir."

The adjutant turned to go and shook hands with George. It was the first time that the count had offered him his hand, the first friendliness that he had received for a long time, the first time that anyone had spoken to him warmly and heartily and sympathised with him. It did not alter things, of course, but in spite of that George felt happier and gayer than he had been for a long time, and the feeling of having acted rightly in the matter gave great satisfaction.

[Pg 239] Olga scarcely recognised him when she came in that evening; she had visited him almost daily lately, for George sat at home evening after evening and thought and meditated on what would happen. He had accepted no invitations, gone nowhere; he had lived in himself, and spent much time in writing long letters to his parents, in which he lamented his misfortunes. It was a necessity of his nature to express his feelings to the people who cared for him, but regularly as the letters were written Olga threw them into the fire. "Your parents cannot help or advise you," she had answered him on the first occasion when she destroyed his letter, and he saw that she was quite right.

To-day when she came she asked if he had finished his letter, and she could hardly believe it when he said he had not written one at all.

"Whatever has happened then?"

He told her of the conversation he had had with the adjutant, and asked her at the end: "Do you think people ought to know how Willberg treated you?"

Olga sat thinking for a long time, then she said: "I care for you very much, I would gladly give you permission to speak openly, but it would not be wise, especially on your account. What do our relations with one another matter to the world? Nobody expects a young lieutenant to be a saint, but he need not publish to the whole world

the fact that he has a 'friend,' and certainly no one need know what her name is and what has happened to her. There would be people who would blame you, and why should you expose yourself to that?"

He kissed her on the forehead. "You are right, as you always are."

He could not tell how it was, but suddenly he wondered how Hildegarde would receive such news. He had not seen her since his return, but daily his thoughts had wandered to her, and now he saw her picture clearly before him.

"George, what are you thinking about so seriously?"

He roused himself from his thoughts and found Olga standing in front of him and laughing.

"You have forgotten all about me, haven't you? For at least a minute you have been staring straight in front of you. What were you thinking of?"

He did not answer her question. "Don't be angry," he begged, "my thoughts were far away."

"In beautiful Paris?"

He could not help laughing. "Not exactly, but now they have returned to you once more," and he tenderly drew her to him.

[Pg 241]

CHAPTER IX

The Humiliation of the "Golden Butterflies"

An officers' meeting had been summoned, which all the officers of the regiment had been commanded to attend, with the single exception of Lieutenant Winkler, and the colonel's behaviour to his lieutenants had been by no means gentle. In his present excited state of mind, and with the fear of possible dismissal after all, he was going to take good care that there should be no further scandals among his officers, and one would certainly be unavoidable if their behaviour to Lieutenant Winkler was not altered. He therefore explained to them the Willberg affairs as far as he was justified in doing so, and assured them that George had behaved splendidly—indeed, many of them might take an example from him. At first the colonel had thought of sending a deputation of three lieutenants to George to convey to him the expression of his comrades' confidence and to apologise for their unjust suspicions. He had discussed [Pg 242] at length with his adjutant as to whether George was not entitled to some substantial compensation, but the latter had not taken his view. To make too much of the affair was to do more harm than good. If the colonel insisted upon an official apology great indignation would be once more aroused; the officers' rage would burst forth anew, and they would consider compensation as a still further humiliation, for George was only a *bourgeois*, and it is always very disagreeable for an aristocrat to say to such a one, "I did you an injustice." After much discussion the colonel agreed to this view, and so he only delivered a thundering philippic, ending with the words: "I have commanded Count Wettborn to inform me daily concerning your behaviour to Lieutenant Winkler; if a single complaint reaches me, if I hear that in the future any one of you behaves in such a way as is not permissible under any circumstances, I shall cause the officer concerned to be sent to a frontier garrison within three days. I swear to this."

This had its effect; at least, inasmuch as in future the officers did not dare to oppose Lieutenant Winkler openly nor to make hostile speeches and remarks against him. Their feeling was not altered, and they did not become more friendly because of the colonel's discourse, but they kept their thoughts to themselves, and behaved towards him in a more polite fashion, if, perhaps, a not more friendly one. It was still [Pg 243] very little, indeed, that George was offered in the way of friendship, but it was yet considerably more than he had lately dared to hope. The present behaviour of his fellow-officers filled him with a certain satisfaction, and being a generous-minded man, he was almost sorry that they had had to endure such harsh words on his account; but in his bearing and in his intercourse with them he betrayed neither the one feeling nor the other. He was polite and amiable, but at the same time independent and self-reliant, as he had been from the beginning. He behaved, indeed, as if he had no idea of what had happened at the officers' meeting, and officially he did not know, for Count Wettborn had not thought it advisable to inform him directly what had been said regarding him to the others; that would have been too great a humiliation of the aristocracy in the eyes of the middle class. The fact that George feigned ignorance so cleverly, that not by a single word did he allude to their former suspicions of him, that he bore no grudge against anyone, and that though he had received ample satisfaction in consequence of the colonel's severe reprimand, he still remained modest and unassuming in his manners and did not play the part of innocence justified, made a certain impression on the better sort of men among the officers.

Although George betrayed nothing of all this, he noticed that very slowly there [Pg 244] was a slight change of feeling towards him. He only told Olga of this, and in his letters home he merely said that very soon he would be quite happy in the regiment. It was, indeed, high time, for he had been more than a year among the "Golden Butterflies." George felt now quite a different being. His cheerful disposition once more showed itself, and his happy nature drove away all the sad thoughts which had lately so filled his mind.

He enjoyed his official duties much more than formerly, and just then several things happened that made them pleasanter than usual. His captain had gone away for a few days, his first lieutenant was on furlough, and as it was a very quiet time in the regiment, George was given the command of his company.

To-day the company had been shooting, and now it was musketry inspection. George had at first entrusted this to the sergeant-major alone, but at the last moment he thought it was his duty to make a personal inspection. He came quite unexpectedly. The men were drawn up in the corridor, and as George mounted the steps he heard from above such a shower of curses that he hurried on. The cry, "The lieutenant is coming!" produced absolute silence in a moment, and the sergeant-major hastened towards him to salute him.

"But, sergeant, whatever is the matter? You know how our captain insists upon a [Pg 245] good tone in the company, and I should not like there to be any difference in his absence. What has happened?"

"Nothing, sir. The lieutenant knows how everything sounds in the corridor if one speaks a little louder than usual, and one has to do that to make one's self understood. Perhaps it was I was a little angry with a man whose gun was badly cleaned."

"Don't get angry with him, but make a note of it and inspect the gun again."

"Certainly, sir. I will attend to your commands."

George was standing on one side with the sergeant-major, and now he dismissed him. "Go on with your inspection."

The sergeant-major went back to his place, and George walked slowly along the line, examining the men's uniforms. Suddenly he stopped in front of a soldier.

"Petersen, what have you done to yourself?"

The man had a swollen and inflamed eye and a great boil on his forehead which prevented him from wearing his cap properly.

"You look horrible. What has happened to you?" inquired George once more.

"I fell down."

"Where?"

"On the steps."

"That's what I am always saying. You lazy fellows don't even know how to walk, and yet you imagine you are fit for a parade march."

[Pg 246] George tried to make a joke of the affair, and, as a rule, he found that his men liked this mode of treatment; but to-day his words called forth no response. Petersen did not laugh, and the men standing by were evidently not amused by it. It struck George as a little odd, but still he thought no more of it, and turned to go, when by chance his glance fell upon Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew, who was standing a little way from him by the window, and who was looking at Petersen with such a threatening and fiery glance that involuntarily George was frightened for a moment.

Then suddenly he grasped the real meaning of the affair. His instinct, which had made him dislike von Nissew from the very beginning, was not wrong then. What he had just seen made him determine to sift the matter to the bottom, so he now went back to the soldier and subjected him to a cross-examination. When did he fall? Who were there when it happened? Had he been to the ward-room and had his wounds dressed by the nurse? Who was in the room when he returned? But he could get nothing out of the man; he had fallen down, nobody had seen it, and he had told none, because he had not wanted to make himself ridiculous on account of his clumsiness.

"What do you know about the matter, Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew?" said George, turning suddenly to him. "You are responsible for these men. Why did you not send this man to the ward-room? The wound looks frightful."

[Pg 247] The non-commissioned officer continued staring at the soldier with threatening eyes. "I know nothing about it, sir. I only discovered the injury just before the inspection, and then it was too late to send him to the nurse."

George knew perfectly well that von Nissew was not speaking the truth, but he did not want to convict him of lying before the assembled men, on the ground of discipline and subordination.

"Show me the place on the steps where you fell down."

A clever liar would have shown George some place or other and said, "Here, sir." But the soldier was so little accustomed to hypocrisy and concealment that he did not know whether to go to the right or to the left, and George once more took him to task. "I want to say something to you, Petersen; you know me, and you know that I try to act fairly towards you all, and shut my eyes whenever I can, but if you stand here and lie to me and make a fool of me, I shall get very angry indeed, and I can assure you you won't appreciate *that* side of me. Well, now out with it. I pledge you my word you shan't suffer for it. Where did you fall down?"

A struggle was going on in Petersen's mind. At last he said: "I did not fall down at all."

"But—what happened then?"

"Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew struck me on the head with a frying-pan."

[Pg 248] George was enraged beyond measure, although from the first he had not for a moment doubted that something of the kind had happened; still, he did not want to betray his feelings towards his subordinate, so he only said: "So that's it. Well, that will do. Now go back into line."

But the private stood still in a stiff attitude before his lieutenant and did not move. "Do you want to say anything else?" asked George. "You know, Petersen, you cannot lodge a complaint against von Nissew to-day. You must not do that till to-morrow, or you yourself will be liable to punishment."

"Sir, if you will allow me, I do not want to make any complaint."

"What do you want, then?"

The soldier, a tall, strong, fine-looking man, trembled in every limb.

"Now, out with it. You can trust me. What is it?"

"Might I venture to ask you most humbly not to tell the non-commissioned officer that I have informed you of the truth in his matter, for then he would thrash me again and make my comrades belabour me with their heavy whips."

George involuntarily took a step back. "What do you mean? You only imagine that. Now, can you believe one of your superiors capable of such a thing?" He was speaking against his own conviction, but for the sake of discipline he was obliged to support those in authority; an opportunity for discovering the whole truth would come later.

[Pg 249] Petersen was still trembling. "We know the non-commissioned officer well enough. Last week Meier intended to lodge a complaint because he knocked out two of his teeth, but he heard this and then he struck him with his riding-whip till the blood ran, and we had to hit him also."

"But how could you do such a thing?"

"The non-commissioned officer threatened us that he would take care that we had no leave of absence on Sunday, and he taunted us till we got mad with anger, and we drove Meier round the place till he couldn't move."

"Well, and what then?" asked George, who could scarcely restrain himself for indignation.

"Then the non-commissioned officer took out an old Bible and made Meier swear on it that he would not make a complaint, and then he told Meier that if he did he would be committing perjury, and perjury was punishable by imprisonment."

George was terribly angry at what he had heard, but, in spite of this, he said, apparently quite calmly, "Very well, that will do now, fall into rank."

But again Petersen did not move, and asked, in an almost tearful tone: "Sir, will you really say nothing of this to the non-commissioned officer?"

"I cannot promise that, but I pledge you my word that von Nissew shall not ill-treat you to-night. He will do nothing more to you. Are you satisfied with that?"

Petersen shook his head. "Then the other non-commissioned officers will, they are
[Pg 250] all in the same box; they are not all so cruel, but they all strike us."

George pretended not to hear the last words. "You may rest content, nothing shall happen to you to-night. I myself shall be in barracks the whole night and will see to things. It is to be hoped you are satisfied now."

"Yes, sir."

Petersen fell into the rank, and George was about to return to the company when he noticed von Nissew standing a little distance off; apparently he was waiting to speak to him, and scarcely was George alone when the non-commissioned officer stepped up to him hastily.

"What do you want of me?" asked George curtly.

Nissew tried in vain to conceal his anxiety and disquietude, and his restless eyes were more unsteady than usual.

"What do you want?" asked George again.

The non-commissioned officer unsuccessfully sought to control his voice, it trembled noticeably as he said, "I wanted to ask you most respectfully—I can imagine what Petersen has just said to you—and I wanted to ask if you would be so good as not to believe a word he says; he is the greatest liar and slanderer in the whole company. Our captain knows that, and gave me orders to give special attention to Petersen, who is secretly a social democrat. His comrades know that. You can ask the
[Pg 251] whole company, and all the corporals, and they will tell you the same thing. Petersen is lying."

George's face expressed boundless contempt, for every word of Petersen's showed that he spoke the absolute truth. Whilst George had been talking to him Nissew had certainly been working upon his men and threatening them with fresh ill-treatment if they did not represent that Petersen was a liar. A feeling of inexpressible repugnance and the greatest horror came over George; he despised him for having ill-treated a defenceless subordinate, but even more for seeking to deny his guilt in this manner. He turned to him and said, "Not only a brute, but a coward? Ugh!"

The non-commissioned officer turned pale, but he made one more effort to clear himself. "You know, sir, what our captain thinks about me; he has indeed informed you, sir, and when he returns from his furlough and speaks to you, sir, concerning me, you will see that you have done me a bitter injustice."

George plainly perceived the inward significance of these words; they reminded him of the morning when he had been reprimanded by his superior on account of his subordinate officer, and he saw how delighted Nissew was that he would be reprimanded a second time because he had ventured to doubt so excellent an officer [Pg 252] as himself. The veins on his forehead swelled, but with a great effort he controlled himself and said, "Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew, whether I am doing you an injustice or not will be decided later, for the present I more than suspect you of the alleged ill-treatment of your subordinates."

Again von Nissew wanted to defend himself, but the sergeant-major appeared to announce that the muskets had all been inspected.

"It is fortunate that you have come, sergeant-major"; and then, turning to him, he said, in a firm, clear voice, "Sergeant-major, take Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew's sword from him, and place him under arrest, pending investigation."

The non-commissioned officer turned as white as the white-washed walls and fell back.

"Now, sergeant-major, why don't you do your work?" asked George, as he still hesitated to carry out the order. "Did you not understand me?"

"Yes, sir," answered the sergeant-major, still with hesitation; "I was only thinking, sir, what the captain would say when he heard this."

With an involuntary movement George laid his hand on his sword. "By Jove, sergeant-major, do you or I command this company? I demand an answer."

"You, sir."

"Well, I am glad you understand that, and now either place the non-commissioned officer under arrest or I shall punish you for disobedience."

[Pg 253] This energetic speech had its effect, and the sergeant-major offered no further opposition.

"Unbuckle your sword, von Nissew."

The non-commissioned officer quite mechanically unbuckled the straps and the sword fell to the ground.

The sergeant-major lifted it up. "Come."

And without once raising his eyes, von Nissew, with shaking knees, went down the steps with the sergeant-major, and a little later George saw them going over the yard together, and then they disappeared into the guard-room, which was in the extreme right-hand corner of the large barracks.

Now, for the first time, George understood clearly what he had done, and for a moment he was overwhelmed with doubts as to whether perhaps he had not acted rashly and without due consideration. Then he summoned Meier to him, told him what Petersen had said, and asked him, on his word of honour, if that was all true.

"Were you forced to swear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you beaten?"

"I can show you the marks still, sir."

The men must certainly have seen that the non-commissioned officer had been placed under arrest, otherwise Meier would not have spoken so openly.

"Show them me."

[Pg 254] The man pulled down his trousers and George could distinctly see the marks of the bloody weals caused by the heavy whip.

"That will do."

The man pulled up his garments again, and in spite of the traces of the brutal ill-treatment George could not help feeling almost pleased at the sight of them. He had not accused von Nissew unjustly; here were proofs of his guilt.

Soon after the sergeant-major returned. "The order is carried out."

"Thank you; dismiss the men. I want to speak to the non-commissioned officers alone."

The latter stood round their lieutenant in a semi-circle, and George purposely made them stand to attention so that his words might be all the more impressive. "I want to inform you at once that I have placed von Nissew under arrest for gross ill-treatment of his subordinates. As so often happens, the matter came to light quite by chance. Had I not attended the inspection to-day, as was originally my intention, I should probably have never known about this, and these disgusting brutalities, for I can call them nothing else, would have continued. I am informed that many other non-commissioned officers have acted in the same way as von Nissew. I cannot feel sure whether you knew about this ill-treatment and failed to notify it, or whether you also have ill-treated your men. I will not examine into that now; it will rather be the [Pg 255] subject of a judicial inquiry. To-day I only wanted to say to you that any one of you who does not feel absolutely free from guilt ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself. I am certainly the last man to blame a non-commissioned officer if, in a fit of anger at a soldier's stupidity or stubbornness, he so far loses his self-control as to give him a blow or a push. Our men quite understand that, and they don't mind a blow given in a state of excitement; they know it does not mean anything, and they know perfectly well that when they are no longer recruits they in their turn will give a secret shove or blow without meaning anything brutal by it. But there is the whole difference in the world between forgetting one's self in one's zeal for duty and knowingly and with consideration ill-treating anyone. The former is human, the latter simply brutal and beastly. Condign punishment will be administered to Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew and to everyone who is guilty of such brutal behaviour. Now, I want to speak very briefly to you about another matter. I am told that the men are afraid of being alone with you to-night in the barracks, because they fear you will revenge yourselves on them for my having placed Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew under arrest. It is a fine testimonial to you that the men are afraid of you instead of having trust in you, and you must all be very proud of this fact." [Pg 256] There was bitter irony in the words. Then George continued: "I will rely on your honour that these fears are groundless, but I have promised to see that no one is ill-treated to-night. I therefore order the sergeant-major and the sergeant to supervise the men's rooms till bedtime and to change guard every two hours, and all the doors are to remain open. At nine o'clock I will take over the duty. That is all I wanted to tell you."

The non-commissioned officers were dismissed. During his speech George had studied their faces carefully—a great many of them had turned alternately crimson and pale, some tried to appear as if the whole thing did not concern them and as if they were entirely free from all blame, but George felt that there were very few who had an absolutely clear conscience.

George went with the sergeant-major into the reading-room of the company to draw up a report of the case and present it to the battalion. It would then be sent to the regiment, and then, owing to the gravity of the case, to the superior courts. He sent off the lance-corporal, who usually acted as clerk, and turned to the sergeant-major. He was horrified at what he had heard and seen, and spoke quite freely about it. "Tell me, sergeant, how is such a thing possible? How is it conceivable that such a thing should have gone on for weeks without anyone knowing anything about it? Did you know anything about it? You live with the men in the same corridor; you must [Pg 257] often, both by day and by night, have gone through the rooms—did you not notice anything suspicious?"

Instead of an answer the sergeant-major merely shrugged his shoulders.

"What does that mean?" demanded George; "you don't mean to tell me that the whole thing was an absolute and complete surprise to you?"

"No, not exactly that," answered the sergeant-major after a slight pause, "but when the time comes for speaking I shall feel quite at my ease; I am aware that I shall be called as a witness at the investigation and must say on oath all that I know about it."

"And what do you know?"

"Really very little, sir, and I can swear with a good conscience that I have never seen or heard anything, and I can equally truthfully swear that no man has ever come to me and made a complaint. I should have made myself liable to punishment if anyone had made an official complaint to me and I had not conveyed it to the proper authorities."

"Quite true, and you say your conscience is quite free from blame."

"I really think so, sir, and I am sure that they cannot bring up anything against me at the inquiry, and that is the important thing for an old soldier who in a few months will have served his twelve years and earned his gratuity and pension."

[Pg 258] "Outwardly that is so, certainly," agreed George, "but your words would seem to indicate that you do not really feel absolutely free from all blame."

"You are right, sir. As I have just told you, I have seen and heard nothing, but I have often imagined that all was not going on quite satisfactorily with the men under von Nissew. On so many occasions one or other of his men had fallen down and hurt himself, or he had knocked against something in the dark. I have several times taken von Nissew to task and said to him: 'You are not striking your men, are you?' and naturally he answered in the negative. I ought, perhaps, to have thereupon made a declaration that he was lying, but what could I do? Ought I to question the men behind a non-commissioned officer's back? That would have been the right thing most likely, but then there would soon be an end to all discipline and subordination. My God! when one thinks how easily one could manage these fellows in former times, how one could turn them round one's little finger, and now? It is enough to make an old soldier weep; and then the newspapers destroy and undermine the little bit of authority we still have left us, in spite of two-years' service, with their cursed scribbling about the ill-treatment of subordinates. You can't blame an old soldier, therefore, if he does not do more than he is absolutely obliged to get these stories published."

George partly agreed with him. "Still, it is not right."

[Pg 259] "I know, sir, but what would have happened if I had officially reported something of which officially I had had no intimation? They would not have allowed me to extend my time in the army; I should not have got my gratuity, and then what would have become of me? Not that they would have meant to punish me by refusing to allow me to re-enlist; on the contrary, they might even have commended my conduct, but none of the higher authorities would have thanked me for bringing to light such an affair without the most pressing necessity."

George could not but assent to the sergeant-major's views, and for the first time he asked himself the question: "How will they thank you for having unearthed this scandal?"

"Then you see I am a married man," continued the sergeant-major after a slight pause, "you know, sir, I have two children, and I don't want to be suddenly turned out into the streets with them. It is frightfully difficult for any of us to get a situation; old non-commissioned officers often hunt about for ever so long, for every employment is crowded. So, of course, one stays in the army as long as ever one can, instead of twelve years, twenty, or even longer, for, at any rate, one has one's work, one's pay, one's home, and one doesn't risk all that unless one is absolutely obliged. One shuts one's eyes for the sake of one's own existence whenever one can, and that is what I have done."

[Pg 260] "Did you never speak to the captain about von Nissew?"

"Very often, sir. I have repeatedly notified to the captain that I thought Nissew ill-treated his men."

"And what did the captain reply?" asked George, with curiosity.

"At first he laughed in my face, then he grew angry. You know, of course, that Nissew will become a sergeant-major later on, and the captain indicated by his behaviour that I was already jealous of my successor. Now I had no reason to feel this, because von Nissew must first be a sergeant and corporal before he can relieve me of my duties. I told the captain this, but he still thought I was jealous because he protected him, and he warned me to treat Nissew fairly and not to be continually looking after him. Well, then, I kept silent; only once did I speak, and then I called the captain's attention to a red mark, one could still see the box on the ear the man had received. Of course the man belonged to Nissew's company."

"Did the captain summon the non-commissioned officer?"

"I do not think so, sir; he only asked me whether I had never in my life given a man a box on the ears. Well, of course, I couldn't swear that I hadn't, and so the captain said he thought I ought not to complain so much against Nissew when I myself had committed the same fault."

[Pg 261] George was thoughtful. "Tell me, sergeant-major, do you think the captain knew anything about the way von Nissew treated his men?"

"No, I don't think he did exactly, sir, for Nissew was always very cautious. He seldom struck men in the face, there were no visible marks of his ill-treatment to be seen, and I cannot understand how he so far lost his self-control to-day as to strike Petersen in this manner. No, the captain certainly knew nothing about these things, but still I have often wondered that he allowed von Nissew to have so much authority over the men. Whoever was given a punishment or anything similar had to report it to von Nissew. I once complained about this to the captain, for you see I am the sergeant-major and I could not allow anyone to encroach upon my duties without taking notice of it, it looked as if I were not trusted. But the captain said I ought not to make myself ridiculous. I knew perfectly well he had every confidence in me, I had quite enough to do, and simply to lighten my duties and to relieve me of some of them he had made this arrangement. When I said to the captain there were still the sergeant and the corporal he signified that I must really leave to him the choice of whatever non-commissioned officer he thought most suitable as my deputy; this depended on the individual and had nothing to do with rank."

[Pg 262] "That is quite right, but it has always been a puzzle to me why the captain so specially favoured von Nissew."

"Not to me, sir. I have known the captain for years; he is a good-hearted man, but very easily managed if anyone knows how to get round him. And Nissew understood this better than anyone else; he is always dancing attendance on him, and running after him like a good dog. I am only wondering what on earth the captain will say when he returns from furlough and hears of this affair."

"We must not let the captain wait for news as long as that; he told me to telegraph to him if anything important happened in the company during his absence. I had quite forgotten that. Please write a telegram immediately: 'Have had Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew placed under arrest pending investigation on account of repeated ill-treatment of subordinates.'"

The sergeant-major wrote the telegram and George himself took it to the telegraph office.

Next morning the captain came back from his furlough. Immediately on receipt of the telegram he had cut short his holiday, and now he was in a state of agitation which George could neither understand nor account for. It is true it was an unpleasant business, but still he ought to be grateful to him for having discovered the condition of affairs and so helped to put an end to any further ill-treatment. [Pg 263] Instead of this, however, his superior officer was filled with a rage and anger against George which transcended all bounds. Immediately on his return he had George sent for to barracks and spoke to him in such a manner that it was almost impossible for the latter to keep his temper and endure his reproaches. "I am, of course, far from approving of what von Nissew did, but still less can I approve of your behaviour, Lieutenant Winkler. You ought to have informed me before taking any steps. I should then have immediately returned and investigated the affair myself, then it would have been time to have taken action against the non-commissioned officer. I must certainly rebuke you for having acted so quickly, and without due consideration; it almost looks as if you wanted to stand on your dignity and vaunt your authority. You knew what a high opinion I have of von Nissew; out of regard to me you ought not to have acted so impulsively, especially as there was really no urgent reason for doing so. Many questions evoke many answers—that is always the case. You ought to have quietly waited to see if Petersen or Meier would make a formal complaint, then it would have been quite time to have acted as you did; perhaps then it would have been sufficient to have summoned the non-commissioned officer and threatened him [Pg 264] with a formal charge if anything of the kind happened again. Instead of this you ask the men all kinds of questions until at last you find out what you intended to find out. You have always had a strong dislike to von Nissew. Now that you have given vent to it perhaps you are satisfied."

George, with a great effort, controlled himself. "I should have acted in precisely the same manner towards any other non-commissioned officer."

The captain laughed mockingly, and the blood rushed to George's cheeks.

"I must request you most respectfully, sir, not to cast any doubt on my words."

"And I must request you most emphatically, sir, not to call me to account in this fashion. If what I tell you is not to your liking you know you have the right of making a formal complaint."

"Yes, sir."

The captain was striding up and down the reading-room like a wild animal; now he stopped in front of George and his eyes were so fierce and bloodshot that the latter was quite frightened. He could scarcely recognise his superior officer who had hitherto been the picture of tranquillity and good manners.

"Lieutenant Winkler, do you really understand what you have done?" continued the superior officer. "I will say nothing of the unpleasant position in which you have put me, but even if you did not consider me, you ought to have thought of the [Pg 265] regiment, and even of yourself. Scarcely have people forgotten the scandal concerning little Willberg, scarcely have we succeeded in allaying the suspicion that you did not act quite rightly, than you reveal a new scandal which all the newspapers will get hold of. The Press of the whole world will attack us, the regiment will be in everybody's mouth, people will throw dirt at us, and some of it will stick. If such a thing had happened in another regiment, it would not have been so bad, but we, as the Guards regiment, ought to see that nothing whatever concerning us comes under public notice that does not redound to our credit. Dirty linen should be washed at home; a stern rebuke, of which only the superior authorities should have been informed in part, would have settled the matter. You have prevented that by your over-hasty report, the battalion must now know of the affair, and a public scandal is unavoidable. But that even is not the end of the matter. His Majesty will hear of the proceedings, and in spite of the great favour you enjoy, His Majesty will not approve of your conduct."

"I beg your pardon for venturing to contradict you, but I know quite well what His Majesty feels about the ill-treatment of soldiers."

"I do too," went on his superior officer, "but it is not necessary to make a mountain out of a mole-hill, and one should not stir up mud without serious consideration."

[Pg 266] Again the blood rushed to George's cheeks, "I am not conscious of any wrong-doing. If I have acted wrongly, however, I am quite ready to bear the consequences."

The captain turned crimson. "You will soon have to do that, whether you like it or not, but that will not compensate me or the regiment. Whether you get your discharge or not is a matter of complete indifference to us; we have managed to exist without you in the past, and we shall continue to do so in the future. But the matter is not over because you depart."

"Perhaps it may be if severe and righteous punishment is meted out to the offender. If the public see the severest punishment is given for such offences public opinion will soon be allayed."

"Oh, that is what you think, do you?" said the captain, contemptuously. "You will have plenty of opportunity of explaining and justifying your behaviour in this matter."

George was enraged at the unjust treatment which his captain dealt out to him, but he determined to keep to his resolution of making a formal charge against the non-commissioned officer. Next morning the captain returned to the attack when he was summoned to the regimental office. Indescribable excitement reigned there; and although his superiors formally praised his conduct and his strictly just treatment, he was obliged to listen to things there which he had not expected.

[Pg 267] "You ought to have remembered that the publicity, and perhaps even the trial would not fall on the non-commissioned officer alone. People will ask how was such a thing possible, how could it have occurred if there had been proper supervision on the part of the superior officers. You, as a lieutenant, know perfectly well that this supervision can only take the form of warning the non-commissioned officers continually that they must not ill-treat their men, and pointing out to them the results if they do so. We cannot be in every non-commissioned officer's pocket, we cannot constantly, by night and day, inspect the barracks, we cannot do any more than is already done to avoid brutal treatment. But, in spite of all this, we superior officers are considered mainly responsible; you will soon see what is the result of this business."

The words of the superior officers plainly showed the fear they had concerning their own careers, and involuntarily George recollected what his former captain had once said to him. It was something of this sort: "The ill-treatment of the soldiers will cease when there is a change in two particulars. First of all, the officers must not be worried by the superior authorities, and the captain and the major must know that one unfavourable inspection will not cost them their posts. How they tremble at the sight of an Excellency: the men are only drilled in what will make a good show. What
[Pg 268] is good for this purpose the major yells out to the captain, the captain to the lieutenants, and the lieutenants to the non-commissioned officers. The curses get worse and worse as they descend in the scale, and the non-commissioned officers must be veritable angels if they do not vent their anger on the men, who, if not actually, are yet indirectly responsible for the bad report. If a Tommy holds his gun badly the captain is blamed for not laying sufficient stress on the correct manipulation of arms in his company; the reprimand is unfair, and the authorities know that perfectly well, but that does not matter: the point is, the captain gets enraged and lets off steam. Nobody to-day troubles about the training of the men, each fights for his own existence. Discharge daily threatens a man for a thousand different reasons, and simply to postpone this as long as possible all kinds of ill-deeds are committed against the subordinates which cry out to Heaven for justice. The path to advancement to-day is strewn with corpses, and it will only be different when we cease to live in an age of inspection, and when a man no longer works simply for his own benefit, but for the whole army.

"Only then will tranquillity return to men's minds, and they will no longer seek to obtain by blows and ill-treatment what is far more easily procured by kindness.

[Pg 269] "That is the first thing. Secondly, this ill-treatment will cease when the superior officers have the courage to look into all complaints, to punish themselves what they see with their own eyes, or to send them to the superior courts for punishment. The only person who has this courage to a certain extent is the very rich officer, to whom it is a matter of no consequence whether he gets his small pay or his smaller pension; or the officer who stands high in the favour of the authorities and can say to himself, 'It will not affect my career if I report the brutalities of my non-commissioned officers for which I am in no way to blame.'

"But the officer who trembles and fears for his future will naturally say to himself, 'I am by no means too secure in my position, and if it gets known that my subordinate officers ill-treat the men I may as well get into civilian's attire at once.' And who will blame a poor captain or major if he tries to avoid reporting a complaint, or warns a non-commissioned officer instead of punishing him when he has struck a man?"

George had then agreed with his captain, but still he could not quite understand that the authorities would have preferred his not bringing to light this inconceivable brutality.

"I can imagine," said the colonel, "what His Majesty will say to me. 'First the affair with Willberg, and now this greater scandal about the non-commissioned officers. [Pg 270] Nice things seem to go on in your regiment.'" And then the colonel added: "If this business costs me my post it will be your fault, yours alone, and it was just you I should never have expected to play us such a trick."

George saw by this that the colonel, who had so lately interposed on his behalf, expected in return that George would have had more regard for the reputation of the regiment, but in spite of this George was really not conscious of having done anything wrong; and an inner voice told him that he had only acted as every honourable man must have acted.

His comrades, just as much as his superiors, blamed him for having reported the matter officially to the authorities. Not that they took the part of the non-commissioned officer; on the contrary, there were universal exclamations of the greatest indignation when George told them how bruised and beaten about the men were, but still, of more importance to them than the well-being of the men was the good reputation of the regiment.

First the affair in the officers' corps, then this scandal with the non-commissioned officers—they were lowered in the public estimation, and in future people would naturally say, "There are fine goings-on among the 'Golden Butterflies'; the lieutenants shoot themselves and the non-commissioned officers thrash the men till they cannot stand."

[Pg 271] And once more George noticed that it was doubly unpleasant to them all that it was precisely he, the only plebeian in the regiment, who had discovered the bad state of affairs that existed in the company.

Again George passed through a terrible time; his position amongst the officers was destroyed, and officially his life was scarcely endurable. His captain treated him with a contempt which often made it scarcely possible for him to maintain his self-control; the colonel jeered at him whenever he could, and in his first lieutenant, Baron von Masemann, he had an able assistant. The latter entirely supported the captain, and considered it now more than ever his duty to educate George and to act as his schoolmaster.

Meanwhile the investigation was going on.

Immediately after the first examination of the accused, on account of the seriousness of the charge, the matter had to be reported to the division. Almost daily there were examinations, and half the company was always on its way to the Court of Justice. Then only too soon the whole extent of the ill-treatment became known; with the exception of the few lance-corporals there was not a single one among von Nissew's men who had not been thrashed till the blood ran, and the lance-corporals, urged on by von Nissew and bribed by privileges which were not permitted, had [Pg 272] helped him to the best of their power. They also had struck and ill-treated their companions as much as they could. Other officers as well as von Nissew had ill-treated their men, though not so badly, and in excuse for their behaviour they had all given the same explanation: "The captain forbade us to swear and to use strong language. He threatened that he would not allow us to re-enlist if we did not act according to his regulations. We did not venture, therefore, to use any strong language towards our men; if we reported a man for idleness or any other cause he was never punished, but only warned to do his duty in future. We all know that the captain is anxious to show that one can command a company without administering punishment."

The punishment-books of the company were examined; according to the views of the superior authorities that company was the best against which the fewest punishments were written. How much unhappiness have not these punishment-books caused, and how many people have not been ruined by them!

Of course, the superior authorities must exercise some control, but not in the manner that rules at present. It is difficult for the official sitting at his desk to judge if the captain has acted rightly when he punished a man with three days' arrest. And then, fancy the openly-avowed principle that that company is the best in which the [Pg 273] fewest punishments are officially reported! Nothing can be more false than this or lead more easily to wrong treatment of subordinates. This attitude taken up by the authorities almost forces a captain to shut his eyes and ears so as not to see or hear anything that is punishable.

Captain von Warnow had always been opposed to punishments, the evidence showed that clearly; he wanted to have the best company, not from any exaggerated military ambition, but simply from personal feeling. Men who had been punished were personally offensive to him, and he could never get over this feeling. A Guardsman in his company would receive a reprimand, but was not put under arrest, and so punishments in the guard-room became rarer and rarer. Thus, in consequence of their captain's views, which were very noble in theory but impossible in practice, the non-commissioned officers received no support from him. Yet the captain demanded a tremendous amount from his non-commissioned officers; the men were to be the best in every respect, and this could not be attained by kindness alone. The men were not to be punished officially, they were not to be cursed and sworn at; if an officer only looked threateningly at a man he was warned to treat him properly. What then was there for the non-commissioned officers to do but to take the matter into their own hands? They vented their anger, not on duty, but in secret.

[Pg 274] If a man did his drill badly this was reported to the captain, with the request that the fellow should be ordered to drill again, but in the captain's view such things should not be necessary in a well-ordered company. Naturally, the non-commissioned officers were vexed at this. They said to themselves, "The fellows simply laugh in our faces when we report them for punishment and nothing happens." So when they gave the men the extra drills they gave them with locked doors, and punished them with the utmost severity. Cuffs and blows rained down upon them, and whoever betrayed by a look or a gesture that he had not imagined it possible to endure such treatment, was so shamefully ill-used that he abandoned all idea of making formal complaint. Frequently the men had to get up at night and do their drill in the rooms, clad only in their night-shirts, and whoever made a false step was beaten with a heavy whip, until the blood flowed.

A sad state of affairs was disclosed; the whole company was called as witnesses, and the officers likewise. The two lieutenants, Baron von Masemann as well as George, said on oath that they had had no idea of this ill-treatment, that no complaint had reached their ears, and that they had never seen or heard anything suspicious when patrolling the rooms.

The examination of Captain von Warnow revealed another side of the matter. He [Pg 275] was obliged to admit that what the sergeant-major said was true. He confessed that on different occasions his attention had been drawn to von Nissew, but he had taken no notice of these warnings. As a reason for this, he could merely allege that von Nissew had seemed to him a very kindly man, and that he would never have credited him with such brutal behaviour. Further than this he had nothing to say in excuse.

"Did you not know, Captain von Warnow, that it was your duty to find out whether the complaints made against the non-commissioned officer were true or not?" asked the judge-advocate who conducted the investigation.

Captain von Warnow stood up proudly. "I believe that I have done my duty in every respect. I have continually warned my officers to treat the men properly."

The judge-advocate entered this statement on the protocol, then he said: "Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew alleges as an excuse for his conduct that you, sir, told him to deal individually with all the weaklings and the blockheads, as he expresses it. He regarded this as permission to give the men extra drills, and he alleges that it was simply his military zeal and the feeling of responsibility for the trust reposed in him which led him into striking the men. May I ask why you entrusted so young a non-commissioned officer with so much authority over the men? [Pg 276] In my opinion, sir, you thus gave the non-commissioned officer opportunity and occasion to ill-treat the men."

"That is merely your opinion, sir. I chose the non-commissioned officer who seemed to me most suitable in every respect for this individual training, if I may so express it."

"Did it ever strike you von Nissew's men very frequently limped or marched badly? Did you never inquire what was the matter, and did you never try to find out whether these accidents of which they spoke really did happen? Just now, when there are so many cases of ill-treatment, you ought certainly to have inquired into the meaning of these injuries. It must have seemed to you very curious that these accidents were of frequent occurrence among von Nissew's men."

Captain von Warnow had listened to the judge-advocate with astonishment, now he said: "It almost seems to me as if you want to make me indirectly responsible for the whole affair. I must defend myself energetically against such an idea."

The judge looked at him straight. "I am certainly of the opinion that you are so far guilty in that you failed to maintain proper supervision over your non-commissioned officers. I feel it my duty to state this in the official document."

The result of this was that Captain von Warnow was formally charged with being indirectly answerable for the ill-treatment, because he had not sufficiently looked after his non-commissioned officers.

Captain von Warnow was suspended, and Baron von Masemann was given the command of the company. It was the sensation of the day. Everybody was astounded, but the news disturbed George more than anyone else. He had neither intended nor desired that his report should have such consequences. According to the views expressed in the Casino, von Warnow would be confined to his own quarters for at least a month; perhaps he would also be forced to resign; and, in any case, he could not remain any longer in the regiment.

The anger of all was poured forth upon George, who had been the cause of all the misfortune. George suffered terribly from the unspoken complaints of the others; he withdrew completely from his comrades, and lived solitary. He was not in the mood to go into Society, and, indeed, how would he have been received? As long as the examination of his captain was proceeding, the latter did not go into Society, and the result was that his women folk also abstained from all gaieties. So George had no chance of talking to Hildegarde, though just at this very time he would so much have liked to see her, and to hear from her whether she condemned and misjudged his action, and whether she was deeply angry with him for having involved her relative in so much shame and unpleasantness.

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CHAPTER X

An Offer of Marriage

Sentence had been pronounced. Non-Commissioned Officer von Nissew received eighteen months' imprisonment and at the same time he was reduced to the ranks; four other non-commissioned officers of the company received six months'. A few days later the court-martial sentenced Captain von Warnow to four weeks' imprisonment in a fortress, because, by not properly supervising his non-commissioned officers he had contributed to the ill-treatment.

The "Golden Butterflies" crept about quite broken-hearted. There was no laughter or merriment in the Casino now; they scarcely ventured, indeed, to give orders to the orderlies, for what must they think of their superiors? If only the proceedings could have been carried on without publicity! but a charge brought into a law court could not be disposed of in this manner, and so the whole ugly story was once more in the newspapers. The Press of all shades of opinion expressed the severest judgment on the events; they threatened, indeed, to ask a question in the *Reichstag* as to how such occurrences were possible, and the case aroused long discussions concerning the value of regulations against the ill-treatment of soldiers, when the superior officers did not insist upon them being carried out. The newspapers were daily filled with long reports. [Pg 279]

But even that was not the worst. His Majesty had had a long detailed report of the affair, and had demanded the documents, and in unmistakable language he had informed the officers and non-commissioned officers that they had forfeited his favour and patronage, and that it would be a very long time before they would regain his confidence.

"We've had a knock-down blow;" somebody at dinner used the expression, and struck the nail on the head: "The Golden Butterflies" had had a severe blow. They were conscious of this in the way they were regarded in Society; their comrades in the other distinguished regiments quietly but unmistakably withdrew from any intercourse with them. Not precisely from any profound conviction, not indeed because the others were enraged that such things should happen in the "Golden Butterflies"; it was indeed no concern of theirs if someone in the regiment was chased about with blows. Similar things happened every day in their own regiment; in the Cavalry there was scarcely a riding lesson when someone or other did not feel the whip. Blows were given everywhere, in some regiments more, in some less, and when, therefore, the other regiments officially declined intercourse with the "Golden Butterflies" it was simply and solely on the score of the publicity. It would make a good impression on the public if they were somewhat reserved in their behaviour to the "Golden Butterflies"; it would appear as if they were better men. And added to this, His Majesty's words soon became known, and, therefore, it was only prudent to be a little cold towards the "Golden Butterflies," for if His Majesty ceased to bestow his favours upon the regiment, it was certainly quite impossible for other people to protect it. [Pg 280]

Yes the "Golden Butterflies" had fallen from their high estate. They saw it most distinctly when they gave their first banquet after the unhappy event. As usual, they had sent invitations to the other regiments, but almost all had declined, only a few young fellows, whose coming was of no importance, had accepted.

Baron Gersbach, the Uhlan, did not come, though Count Wettborn personally invited him, and promised him a long night of gambling.

But Baron Gersbach still declined. "Do not take it as an offence, my dear count, but affairs are not quite as they ought to be in your regiment; too much about them has got into the newspapers, and who can guarantee that one of your men or one of your non-commissioned officers who is occupied in attending on us will not run round to a newspaper and relate piping hot all that we have been doing. When one of your lieutenants, through a perfectly inexcusable indiscretion, draws down upon you such a scandal, one cannot any longer wonder if your men do the same thing. Well, I don't want any of that, thank you. I have no desire to get into the newspapers; I can assure you I was delighted to get off so easily when Willberg disappeared from this earthly scene. Do not be vexed with me for speaking so frankly, but as long as you have such people among you as Winkler, we cannot keep up friendly relations with you." [Pg 281]

In vain Count Wettborn sought to say a good word on behalf of George, but it was of no avail.

"Certainly, he has the best intentions," agreed the Uhlan; "but good intentions alone are not sufficient; as sensible and experienced men, one must consider consequences. Now the consequences of his actions you know better than I do, and the whole affair is by no means pleasant for us. As Guard regiments we form one whole, and, therefore, what affects one casts its shadow on the others likewise, for people do not say such and such a thing happened in the 'Golden Butterflies,' but simply 'in the Guards.' Such a thing is frightful, for more than all the other regiments [Pg 282] we must maintain outwardly, at any rate, a good reputation. Something more than the ordinary performance of our military duties is demanded from us, and, therefore, we are sometimes obliged to act with exceptional severity against our men. And then suddenly an idealistic reformer comes along, who wants to do away with all cuffs and blows; that is all very well in theory, but when it provokes open scandal, one simply can't have anything more to do with him."

So the count was obliged to depart without having obtained his object, and though until then, from a feeling of justice, he had been the only one who took George's part, he now came to the conclusion that it was impossible for Winkler to remain any longer in the regiment.

With this idea in his mind the count spoke one day to the colonel. "We can't go on much longer like this, sir, we are almost boycotted, we shall never get another guest as long as Winkler is here. He has brought us and himself, let alone everyone else, into discredit. Formerly one could not allege anything against him except his plebeian descent, but now there is a very strong feeling among the officers that he only lodged the complaint because he is plebeian."

The colonel looked up with astonishment. "I do not understand what you mean."

"Pardon me, sir, the thing is very simple. The officers believe that in giving this official information, Winkler, to a certain extent, wanted to have his revenge, [Pg 283] because we had not extended to him the hand of fellowship as he had expected. He has, therefore, served us this trick and meant to signify: 'I am the only plebeian among you, but my ways are far more seemly than yours; simply to avoid discredit falling upon your regiment and your proud aristocratic names, you shut your eyes and ears, and permit your men to be ill-treated. But I can act and think with less prejudice, I am less hide-bound by the "caste" feeling which bids you preserve appearances, and so I can act as my conscience dictates. I am guided by my feeling of what is right alone and not by false prejudices.'"

"But that's simply nonsense," exclaimed the colonel.

"It may be, and I daresay such considerations are far removed from Winkler, but the officers credit him with these, and so what can one do? Nothing is more difficult than to talk the officers out of an idea which they have firmly seized upon—you know that, sir, do you not?"

The colonel groaned. "God knows it cost me trouble enough before to try and get the lieutenants to try and listen a little to reason."

He lit his cigar again which had gone out, and blew out great clouds of smoke.

"Dear count, let me give you some good advice. If you are not given a pension soon then leave the army before you become the colonel and commander of a [Pg 284] regiment. I can assure you our path is not strewn with roses; we are answerable for everything; for the training of the troops, the tone in the regiment, for the non-commissioned officers, and last, but not least, for the officers. It is a vale of tears. No, I do not want to commit a sin," he continued reflectively, "I have every reason, therefore, to be grateful to Heaven, for had I known that I should live to see this day, I should have taken poison."

He pulled at his collar with his right hand to make it easier, for he suddenly felt as if he were being throttled.

Then suddenly he struck the table with a tremendous blow, so that the count, who meanwhile had been occupied in admiring his most up-to-date patent shoes, started with fright. The colonel noticed it, but paid no attention to it. "It is a scandalous thing," he burst forth in a rage; "we have weathered two storms successfully and now a third threatens, called Winkler. May God pardon me the sin, but I wish he had never been born, or at least had never come among us. He has certainly got no pleasure out of it, and neither have we." The colonel nervously patted his somewhat thin hair with his right hand. "You are quite right, my dear count, when you say quite simply we shall never regain our credit until we have got rid of Winkler. You call my attention to the impossible state of affairs among the officers and declare we cannot [Pg 285] alter that until we get rid of Winkler. It is all very well to say that, but how will you get rid of him? I cannot indeed suggest any reasons for his exchange; when His Majesty learns the real reason, when he hears that even a single officer in the regiment does not hold Winkler in high esteem, and that it was he who gave information of the ill-treatment, then——" and the colonel shook his head. "It's not to be thought about; there will be such a crash as makes me shudder to think of. I told you how extremely highly and appreciatively His Majesty spoke of Winkler. Well, when I inform His Majesty that the man does not suit us, we shall get something compared with which all former ungracious remarks of His Majesty were but child's play. With all respect to my most gracious Sovereign, I cannot help saying, 'Do not go to your prince unless you are summoned.' I cannot, you see, suggest any reason to

Winkler for his exchange, for if we are to be just, it must be confessed there is absolutely nothing against him."

The count went on polishing up his eyeglass, then he said: "What you say, sir, is very just. I was thinking over the matter last night, and I came to the conclusion that it would be ever so much better if Winkler's exchange did not emanate from us; he must himself apply for it, and if he will not do that, we must persuade him to get a [Pg 286] year's furlough. Probably he would consider the matter in the interval, and would not care to put on a uniform again. But still, even if he does, after the disagreeable experience he has had with us, he will certainly not desire to rejoin us, but will get into another regiment."

The colonel had been listening attentively, now he nodded approvingly. "That would do, dear count, that's not a bad way out of the difficulty. Of course, I would recommend him most warmly for leave of absence, and as His Majesty regards him with great favour, there is not the slightest doubt that his request would be granted —if we can only once get him to make the request."

"We shall soon be able to do that, sir, I will speak to him at the very earliest opportunity."

In the evening of the same day on which the count and the colonel had been talking over George's future, George also conversed with Olga on the same subject.

"I am tired of the whole thing, Olga, I shall not stay here any longer; I am sick of knocking my head against a stone wall that divides me from my fellow-officers. I have made up my mind to-day, I shall give in my resignation."

Olga, who lately had been almost daily with George, and to whom he frankly expressed all his thoughts, had clearly foreseen that sooner or later it would come to this, nevertheless she was startled by his words, and sought to dissuade him but in vain.

[Pg 287] "At least exchange into another regiment," she begged.

But George shook his head. "There's no object in that, dear. I know, of course, I should not be transferred to a miserable frontier garrison where one is nearly driven crazy; on the contrary, I should be sent to some fine town, but what should I do there? I know that I should take a certain position there, for one thing because I have been in the Guards, if only for a very short time, and that is thought much of in the provinces, and for another, because I am a rich man. For the latter reason alone I shall be heartily welcomed, for everybody will be delighted to be able to borrow from me. I know that from my former experience in the garrison, in all these little towns a newcomer who can be regarded as a new source for loans, is fêted and welcomed like a god: and everybody borrows money from him, from the captain down to the youngest lieutenant—even the ensign plucks up his courage by aid of a drink, and requests the lieutenant most respectfully for a loan of twenty marks. I know the whole thing. I never asked for a promissory note when I lent the money, but they always gave me one, for in such matters, one must preserve formality and act correctly, but not a single man ever redeemed his I O U. They are all lying now in my writing-desk, carefully arranged, to some extent a contribution to the history of the [Pg 288] manners and morals of German lieutenants, a contribution to the study of the characteristics of 'aristocratic persons.'"

He had risen and opened a drawer and was turning over the papers which he had taken out of a case.

"Look at these, Olga, you need not read the names, they are of no interest to you. Here is written: 'Herewith I pledge my word of honour to return the loan of five hundred marks within the next three months at latest.' 'Herewith I give my word of honour to return the thousand marks lent me to-day within——' and on, dear. Dozens of these documents are lying here; dozens of unredeemed pledges given on their word of honour, and yet these very men who have broken their pledge are going about in the world as haughty officers." He was silent for a moment, then he said, "By Jove! these lieutenants are quite different from other people; to a certain extent they form a class by themselves, and their ignorance and lack of understanding in certain matters are really more than *naïve*. I confess I don't understand these aristocratic persons, and because I don't understand them I can find no excuse for their doings and acts, their thoughts and their feelings. I can forgive them for what they have done to me, difficult though that is, but I can scarcely endure their fine airs in Society, especially when there is scarcely any other class whose general [Pg 289] education is so poor and lamentable as that of the officers. I was indeed nearly going to say they could neither read nor write properly."

"Now, now, George," admonished Olga, "you must not exaggerate because you are angry."

"I am not angry, I am only sad that things are so bad with our officers. But I really believe I have under-stated the case. The lieutenants can read, but can they also write? Look at these begging letters and promissory notes which I just showed you; you will find beauties of style there, compared with which those of the everlasting fourth-form boy of the comic papers are mere nothings. But that is not all. You will find such spelling as would bring down public rebuke upon a third-form boy. You may laugh, Olga, but what I tell you is the sad fact. Of course, my remarks only referred to the lieutenants, and not to the superior officers, but how often have I not noticed even among them how terribly embarrassed they are if they have to make a report suddenly. Every word is such an effort to them that one feels truly sorry for them. Yet, in spite of all this, in spite of the lack of the simplest culture, all this arrogance and self-complacence! Naturally, every one ought to be proud of his calling, but this pride ought not to degenerate into a perfectly fanatical arrogance. Formerly people spoke of the young, well-educated, knightly lieutenants, the perfect cavaliers. Where [Pg 290] are they now? You must go with a lantern and search for them. I have scarcely known one during my time of service, and the few who enter the army straight from their home, fresh and unspoiled, are only too quickly infected with the spirit of caste, and the demon of haughtiness takes possession of them. Ask the parents whose sons have become officers whether they are not often shocked at the conceit and pretentiousness of the young fellows for whom the best is not considered good enough; whether they have not often bitterly repented having allowed their sons to choose a profession which often estranges them from their own parents, who are too often only regarded as the source of money for their frivolous or luxurious lives."

"George, you are exaggerating absurdly," said Olga, rebukingly.

"Do you really think so? I can only say I have often known young lieutenants who are really ashamed because their fathers are teachers or something similar, but in spite of this they are not ashamed to send home for more money in order to maintain a good appearance. They wish—no, according to their view they *must* give the idea of coming from good families. I was once at dinner and I heard with my own ears how a lieutenant pretended his father was a pensioned officer because he felt embarrassed at having to say he was a doctor."

"Fi, that's a beautiful idea."

Count Wettborn had, therefore, an easy task when he came to persuade George to [Pg 291] go on furlough. He was much astonished when he heard that George was quite determined to send in his resignation, and to enter his father's factory; but, naturally, he made no attempt to dissuade him.

"And when do you think of sending in your request?"

"In a day or two. My father writes to me that he is commanded to an audience with His Majesty, and that he will be here at the beginning of next week. Although I am a completely free agent in this matter, and can go and come as I like, still I think it is my duty to inform my father of my resolution as soon as possible."

"Certainly, certainly," agreed Count Wettborn, "a week sooner or later makes no difference."

And that was just what the officers thought when they heard that Winkler was going. Whether he remained a week more or less—that was a matter of no importance—the thing was, they were going to get rid of him.

"I say, boys, we'll be a little bit nice to him during these last few days," suggested one of the officers. "We will behave as if we were rather sorry that he's going, for, after all, it's not exactly his fault that he doesn't suit us. Besides, it would be a good thing for us if the memory of his last days among us was a pleasant one; later on he [Pg 292] will often tell stories of the days when he had the honour of belonging to us, and although, of course, it doesn't really matter what he says about us to his shopkeeper friends, still, it won't do us any harm if he says, 'The "Golden Butterflies" are a damned fine regiment; they're a charming set of good-hearted, dear fellows who are second to none in their friendliness and good fellowship.'"

But the proposal evoked no response. "For his own sake he won't say much about his dealings with us and how we drove him out."

But they all agreed, however, to drop every appearance of ill-will and to be, at least outwardly, polite and amiable during these last days.

George could scarcely suppress a contemptuous laugh when he noticed the sudden change of feeling, and an ironical word was always on the tip of his tongue when his comrades asked sympathetically after his future plans, and feigned interest in all his concerns. Often he was sorely tempted to cry out—"Don't trouble yourselves, you know you can't disguise your joy in getting rid of me." But he was silent. What was the good of saying anything, the officers would not have admitted their true feelings.

One day at lunch a comrade went so far as to offer him a glass of champagne. He had just won a few hundred marks in the Prussian lottery and had received permission from the eldest officer at the table to celebrate it in this way.

Winkler could scarcely believe his ears when his companion said to him: "You'll do [Pg 293] me the pleasure of drinking a glass of champagne with me, won't you?"

George's first instinct was to cry out: "During the whole time that I have been here not a single human being has shown me the least kindliness; I must, therefore, decline the honour." Anger and indignation rose within him that now, just as he was leaving, anyone should dare to show hospitality to him, but suddenly his sense of humour got the upper hand, the invitation seemed so utterly absurd, and he accepted it with thanks. "But only on one condition," he added, following a sudden impulse, and then in a loud voice so that everyone could hear, "On the day when my resignation is accepted I should like to give a solemn farewell banquet to my fellow-officers. I can only accept an invitation if I know that I shall have an opportunity of returning it. You will come, will you not," he said, turning to his host, "and you—and you and you?" He invited everybody at the long table, and not a single one refused; all were thinking the same thing: "If it pleases him, why on earth shouldn't we for once have a good spread at his expense? One isn't, therefore, pledged to anything, the thing need go no further."

George was overcome by a feeling of repugnance towards his comrades when he found that they all accepted his invitation: were they not ashamed of accepting [Pg 294] hospitality from a man whom they had treated so badly? He had been joking when he gave the invitation, and had felt quite certain that they would all have made excuses of some sort or another, and he had been pleased at the idea of these excuses, and now they had, one and all, accepted! And it did not stop there; the officers inquired when and where the dinner would be; not in the club-room, it was to be hoped. The rooms, of course, were beautiful, but always the same food. How nice it would be to have it in one of the best restaurants! A few pounds more or less wouldn't matter to him, of course, and they hoped he would order French champagne only.

"I heard rather a good story lately about that," said one of the officers; "let's see, what was it? Oh, yes, I remember; If you give your guest German champagne and tell him it is French, he will not be deceived, and will not drink it; but give him French champagne and say it is German he'll drink it right enough. Mind you make a note of that, Winkler." George promised to remember this and to send the invitations as soon as he had spoken to his father about it.

"When is your father coming?" George himself did not know, and expected him daily; so did the "Golden Butterflies." They began to get anxious when still the old fellow did not come. What if he was not coming at all? Perhaps it had been the [Pg 295] stratagem of George's to speak about his resignation and to try and produce a change of feeling towards him; perhaps the old fellow would not appear for ages, and it had been a trick of George's to make fools of them, to make merry at their expense, and to a certain extent to have his revenge on them.

They were getting frightfully anxious about the matter; the joy, therefore, was great when one day at lunch in the Casino George's fellow-officer in his company, Baron von Masemann, informed them: "The manufacturer of trouser buttons has arrived. I saw him last night in a restaurant."

"Thank Heaven!" was uttered by all; and then the question was immediately asked, "What's he like?"

"Quite impossible. The fellow wears a ready-made tie, unstarched cuffs, and a pair of boots that one can see at a glance were never made in Berlin; and then at dinner the fellow cuts his bread with a knife instead of breaking it."

"How awful!"

An exclamation of genuine indignation arose from all present.

"Do stop," implored a young lieutenant; "remember we have only just had our lunch."

"Calm yourselves, my friends," continued the baron; "in spite of all drawbacks the old boy has *one* great advantage."

"And what is that?"

"He has a daughter."

[Pg 296] "What, really! Winkler never told us a word about it."

All surrounded the speaker, eager with curiosity.

"Is she pretty?" asked one at last, and the others pressed more closely to hear the answer.

The baron purposely delayed his answer for some time, then he said: "Pretty? my dear boys, she's much more than that, and although she comes from the provinces she's awfully *chic*. But you must see her figure. I can tell you——" and he smacked his tongue.

"Did you get introduced to her?"

"Unfortunately, no; I was with friends in the restaurant, and had no opportunity of getting rid of them, but this evening it will be all right. I heard quite by chance that the old trouser-button manufacturer reserved a table for himself for to-day. I shall take good care to be there, and when once I am introduced to the young lady I have no fear about conquering."

"In other words, you are trying to catch the gold fish."

Baron von Masemann calmly lit a cigarette. "Someone will marry her. Why shouldn't I be that someone?"

"Quite so, but do you think the *coup* will be successful?"

The baron shrugged his shoulders. "Who can say? One can but try. After all, one can't get more than a refusal at the worst. And then why should the old boy say 'No,' [Pg 297] if I only succeed in making the daughter infatuated about me? My family is first-class. I myself am not worse than other fellows, and the few debts I have are of no importance; the old fellow has plenty of money, and ought to be delighted if he can get such an aristocratic son-in-law for his money."

The others quite agreed; what reason indeed could the father and daughter possibly have for not receiving the baron with open arms? And thereupon several of them regarded the suggested engagement as a *fait accompli*.

"Were you on friendly terms with Winkler when you were together in the company?" one of the men asked. "Perhaps he'll have a word to say in the matter."

"I was thinking about that last night," replied Masemann. "We were certainly not particularly friendly, but still Winkler ought to be very glad to have me for a brother-in-law. In this way he will remain to a certain extent connected with the regiment, and that is really of very great advantage to him. Only think what a position the fellow will be able to take in Society if he can say, 'My brother-in-law, Baron Von Masemann.' That is almost as valuable to him as being aristocratic himself. Naturally I shall manage not to have too much of my brother-in-law, and shall see that he is not always running in and out of my house; but that's all later on, the present thing is to try one's luck."

[Pg 298] But that evening the baron had no luck; he waited in vain for the Winklers. They were all sitting in George's rooms, and the honorary commercial adviser to the Emperor was telling them of the audience he had had with His Majesty, and how he had graciously inquired after George and expressed his pleasure at the way George had acted with regard to the ill-treatment of soldiers. He went on to tell them how pleased His Majesty was to hear a good report of him from the officers and of his popularity among his comrades. His Majesty greatly regretted that, owing to other arrangements, he could not keep his promise of asking George to dine with him to-morrow.

"Did I not always tell you so?" concluded the old man. "Do you remember how at first you wanted to fling down your gun in despair? Who was right—you or I?"

George exchanged a hasty glance with his sister, whom he had informed of his resolution yesterday; he had not wanted to spoil his father's pleasure in seeing him again on the very first day, and he also wanted to prevent his father from saying anything about his resignation in his audience with the Emperor. So he had kept silent till this moment, but now he was obliged to speak, and his father's last words made the task easy.

"What if I am right after all, father. When I tell you I am just as much an 'outsider' [Pg 299] to-day as I ever was, when I tell you that my position in the regiment was not improved by His Majesty's praise of me, and that the officers' story of my popularity was simply a lie to avoid vexing the Emperor—what would you say then?"

The father looked at his son with astonishment.

"I do not understand what you mean!"

"I will explain myself a little more fully." And he proceeded to relate in detail all that had happened to him from the very first day he entered the regiment; how they longed for him to send in his resignation, and how, at last, he had made up his mind to do so, not to please the "Golden Butterflies," but simply in order to be able to enjoy life once more.

The father listened, absolutely disconcerted, then he struck a sounding blow on the table. "And what if I forbid you to do so, and order you to remain an officer for some time longer?"

George looked at him calmly. "You will not command me to do this, father. You told me when I entered the army I was perfectly free to leave it whenever I liked, and you will not go back from your word."

"But what if I do—what if I don't want the other officers to triumph in your failure?"

"Then I should resign in spite of it. I am of age and can do what I like."

The old man was on the verge of losing complete self-control. "And what if I disinherit you?"

[Pg 300] "I should still do it. I have savings enough to live quite free from all anxiety for some time to come, and as your son I shall soon get employment somewhere."

Again his father was about to burst forth indignantly, when Elsa broke into the conversation and tenderly soothed him. "Don't oppose him any more," she entreated. "George thoroughly discussed the matter with me yesterday, and to-day I vainly tried to get him to change his mind; he is so unhappy as an officer that one can't wish him to be forced to endure it any longer."

The old man sat silent for a long time. "Mother will be frightfully upset," he said at last.

The brother and sister exchanged swift glances; they knew that the battle was won, but they took care not to give vent to their feeling of satisfaction.

"Won't you mind leaving the army?"

"How could I, after all the humiliation I have endured? I rejoice a thousandfold in taking off my officer's uniform, which apparently does not go with my views and ideas, although I did my duties very well compared with others."

"Is not every officer an enthusiastic soldier, then?" asked Elsa.

George burst out laughing. "You innocent angel! I can assure you at least half of the lieutenants would give in their resignations at once if they were in a financial [Pg 301] position to do so. The best proof of my assertion is that every lieutenant tries to find a rich wife; when he has found one he either leaves the army immediately, or stays there as long as he gets any enjoyment from it. If it becomes too dull or worrying for him he throws up his commission and says to his superiors, 'See how you can manage to get along without me. Other people can be driven mad by your worrying ways, thank Heaven I am no longer obliged to put up with all these things.' Of course there are exceptions; there are the ambitious and energetic men who want to get big military appointments, who dream of red stripes on their trousers and the title of Excellency; it may be hard for such men to have to leave the army. And then there are certainly a few who are really soldiers, heart and soul, but their number is small—where are they to be found? Among the subordinate officers I have scarcely known a single lieutenant who did not curse and swear when he was set to perform a duty, and who would not have preferred to depart at once if only he knew how he was to earn his living. This sounds hard, but I assure you it is quite true. Even when a lieutenant says, 'I like being an officer,' it is generally because of the position it gives him in Society and not because he likes exercising and drilling the men. And it is just the same with the captain as with the lieutenant; his superiors are always running after him, they lead him a hell of a life, and are always reprimanding him for some [Pg 302] fault or other committed by his men. Who could enjoy military duties under these circumstances? A man feels stifled. Yet the wretched captain must bear it all because he has a wife and children and no money, because he is forced to remain in the army as long as possible to get the higher pension and so be able to live. He is worried and bothered from morning to eve, and even then, in the majority of cases, he does not succeed in getting what he wants, and has later on to suffer poverty and misery; and if he abandons his uniform with regret it is not because he is sorry to leave the army, but because of his wasted life. He is in full possession of all his mental and physical faculties, and yet he is condemned to inactivity and ceaseless money worries. Among the superior officers there is certainly to be found an enthusiasm for the army. There is none among the subordinates, at least not in the infantry."

The father was peevish and ill-tempered; he controlled himself as well as he could, but from time to time his indignation burst forth, and his children found it difficult to appease him.

"And are you really going to give in your resignation to-morrow? Will you not consider it for another month? Why do you not get leave of absence for a year, or less, if you like?"

George shook his head. "The sooner I go the better, father. I don't get on among the officers, who often have the most extraordinary views on things." And, as if in [Pg 303] confirmation of these words, the servant brought in a letter at that moment.

"Is there any answer?"

"No."

The servant went away and George opened the letter.

"Whatever is the matter?" asked Elsa, who had been watching her brother while he was reading.

George jumped up. "I have never heard such a piece of insolence in my whole life. Just listen to this; but first of all I must recall to you one of my fellow-officers who was sitting in the same restaurant with us yesterday."

"Oh, yes, that odd young man who was not quite sure at first whether he should bow to us, and then afterwards attempted to flirt with me so outrageously," said Elsa. "Well, what about him?"

"Not much," answered George apparently calmly. "He merely wishes to be allowed to ask for your hand."

Father and daughter looked at one another, speechless with astonishment, then Elsa broke into a hearty laugh, in which the others joined too.

"Why, he doesn't even know me," she said.

"Oh, that isn't in the least necessary; he knows your fortune, he knows that you are a very good *parti*, and naturally that's quite enough for him. A man can get on all [Pg 304] right without love, but not without money. Well, now, listen to what this fine fellow writes. But I must tell you beforehand that from the first few of my comrades were so unfriendly to me as he was."

Then he read out the letter:

> "My very dear Winkler,—I am sitting alone and solitary in the restaurant, and for a whole hour I have been impatiently watching the door in the hope of seeing you and your people come in, for I heard by chance that your father had ordered dinner here for this evening.
>
> "Without telling you, you will, I expect, have already guessed that I only went into the restaurant to-day in the happy expectation of being introduced to your sister and your much-respected father, for I must frankly confess to you that no young girl has ever made such a deep and indelible impression upon me as your sister did. Although up to now I have only had the opportunity of observing her beauty and her grace, yet I am quite sure that a beautiful soul must dwell in such a beautiful body, and I have only one wish in the world—to become acquainted with your sister. As we have always had such pleasant and friendly relations with one another I venture to ask if I may pay my respects to [Pg 305] your highly-esteemed father and beautiful sister, and I beg you most courteously to say a few kindly words on my behalf. Naturally all information concerning myself and my financial position is at your father's disposal whenever he likes. In conclusion, I beg you not to be vexed at the somewhat odd nature of these few lines, but I know that your father is only staying here for a few days, and I do not want your sister to leave Berlin without my having the opportunity of becoming acquainted with her.
>
> "Pray accept my kindest regards for your honoured, but at present, alas! unknown, relatives, and,—Believe me, with best greetings, yours very sincerely,
>
> "Von Masemann."

"Well, what do you say to that?" inquired George.

"Is it possible?" cried out the old manufacturer. "I must say I have never heard of such a thing in all my life."

"And what do you think about it, Elsa?"

"I really do not know whether to laugh or be angry about it. I can't think how he isn't ashamed to write such a letter."

George laughed mockingly. "Ashamed? Why, Elsa, you can know very little about a lieutenant if you think he would be ashamed of anything. Your beauty has turned his head, you have a big fortune, so that's all right; he marches to victory like Blucher to Waterloo. If he's successful, all right, if he's not, then he seeks his luck [Pg 306] somewhere else; he means to catch a goldfish somewhere or other. The more impudent he is the more easily he attains to the object of his desires."

"Not as far as we are concerned," burst out the commercial adviser to the Emperor. "Please tell your aristocratic friend to-morrow from me——"

George interrupted him. "No, father, I have already settled about the answer. He won't much care about it, I can assure you. I am going to ask him how it is, that he has been unable to have any social intercourse with me and yet desires to marry my sister." After a pause he continued, "It is really a pity, Elsa, you are not going to stay here a few days, for then you would have had all the officers at your feet; all, from the oldest staff-officer down to the youngest lieutenant, would try to curry favour with me so that I might say a good word to you on their behalf. Your thousands would induce even the most aristocratic lieutenant who usually boasts of his numberless ancestors, to recognise the *bourgeoisie* and to condescend to make you his highly-honoured wife."

"A fine set of people these," said the father, angrily.

"I thank them for the honour they pay me in wishing to marry me for my money, but I don't think I want to marry at all."

George regarded his sister with amusement. "Ha, ha, one day you'll find the flame [Pg 307] of love, and quite right too. By the way, how old are you—nineteen or twenty?"

"I am twenty-one now."

"And has no one seriously paid court to you?"

She burst out laughing. "Oh, often, like your comrade here to-day, but I did not care about any of them, for, oddly enough, it was always officers who paid me attention, always lieutenants, and, unfortunately, the only lieutenant whom I love I cannot get."

George looked at her wonderingly. "Why not?"

"Because he happens to be my brother."

Laughingly George drew his sister to him. "Come here, dear, and give me a kiss." Then he went on. "But seriously, Elsa, you have grown much more beautiful lately." He was delighted with his sister's looks: she had a slim figure, a proud bearing, beautiful eyes, and her whole appearance was charming.

"Do you know that you are very like Hildegarde in many ways?" he said, suddenly.

It was the first time that he had actually said her name to his people, and now that he had done it he felt shy and was quite embarrassed at his sister's glance.

Their father had meanwhile taken up the evening paper, now he laid it aside. "Go on, George, you yourself began it, you know. You have so often written to us about [Pg 308] your Hildegarde. Who and what is she, and how do you stand with regard to her?"

George tried to avoid answering, but Elsa urged him to speak. "Do tell me something about her. In your letters you could not write enough about her—at any rate, in the beginning! lately I have heard much less about her. Is she vexed with you about anything?"

"No, I don't think so," answered George, after a moment's thought; "at any rate I do not know of any reason for it. I told you that Hildegarde was a relative of my captain, who is now undergoing imprisonment in a fortress. Naturally during this time Frau von Warnow does not go out, and so, lately, I have only seen Hildegarde once or twice quite casually in the street."

"Haven't you spoken to her at all?"

"Twice I meant to do so, but I should have had to inquire how the Warnows were, and, of course, that would be very disagreeable for me."

"But how do you stand with regard to her," his father asked for the second time. "You know your mother has prophesied for a long time that you were going to get engaged to her. Is she right?"

"As you ask me straight out, I will tell you that at first I had the same idea, and I think that if this horrible business had not come between us, and if we had seen one another more often, things would have been all right, but now——"

[Pg 309] Elsa saw such a sorrowful and despairing look in her brother's face that she said to him, "But won't you find it very hard to go away without seeing her again?"

"I shall see her once again," answered George, with determination. "I shall pay a farewell visit. I shall ask Hildegarde to name an hour when I am sure to see her." And then, acting on a sudden impulse, he said: "By the way, Elsa, I told Hildegarde all sorts of things about you. I told her you wanted to become acquainted with her, and she was delighted. Will you do me a favour and call upon her, or, better still, ask her to call upon you at the hotel? I will be there, too, and then when we meet again after several weeks we shall know what we feel towards one another, and if Hildegarde loves me, then——"

"Not so fast, my boy, not so fast," put in the old man. "I am still in existence. I should like to see my future daughter-in-law before I am called up to consent and say 'Amen.'"

George had a sudden vision of Hildegarde; the memory of the delightful hours they had spent together awakened in him a great longing to see her again.

"Oh, you will like Hildegarde, father, she is beautiful and good, and in spite of her aristocratic birth she does not share the often extraordinary views of her class. I have told her a great deal about you, father; about the factory, your consideration for your workpeople, your ceaseless activity, and she was interested in and understood everything." He spoke of her with an ardour and an enthusiasm which showed how much he cared for her.

"And what sort of a family has she?" inquired old Winkler. "You know I don't care whether she has money or not—you need not trouble about that—what I mean is, do you know anything about her relations? Has she any brothers and sisters? What are her parents?"

George gave what information he could.

"Oh, so there's a scamp of a lieutenant," grumbled the father; "instead of parents who have no money making their son learn some business or other, the young fellows have to become officers, so that they may get drunk on champagne at the regimental banquet."

"But Hildegarde cannot help that," George said, as if he had to protect her: "and what does her brother matter to me?"

"What does he matter? Well"—the old man got up—"a man does not only marry a wife, but the whole family, take that from me, my boy, and so, before taking any steps, we must look into things a bit. But I will frankly confess one thing to you: I have privately long desired you to marry. It's all the same to me whom, as long as you love her. Well, now we can go and see your Hildegarde."

[Pg 311]

CHAPTER XI

Farewell to the Army!

"My son just engaged to your daughter. For Hildegarde's sake will try to assist you and your son. Expect you both to-morrow for consultation on subject."

This telegram sent off by the old manufacturer caused indescribable excitement in the major's home; weeping with joy and agitation the husband and wife flung themselves into each other's arms and blessed the day on which Heaven had given them Hildegarde.

"A fine girl, a good girl," said the major a dozen times over, and if there was anything that troubled his intense joy it was that Hilda was not with them. He would so much have liked to take her in his arms, and in his somewhat rough fashion to have patted her on the shoulder and said: "You have done well, my girl."

He laughed hoarsely, and lit the dearest cigar he had in the house. One ought to make merry on festivals whenever they occur, and to-day was truly a festival: Hildegarde engaged to the son of one of the richest wholesale manufacturers, that [Pg 312] was indeed more than mere good luck, and almost unconsciously the major folded his hands and thanked the good God for having sent him so rich a son-in-law. He read and re-read the telegram; he could not at once take in the whole extent of the joyful news, and the oftener he read the telegram and the more calmly he gradually accepted its contents, the more he took exception each time to the words: "For Hildegarde's sake will try to assist you and your son. Expect you both to-morrow." What did that mean—will try; it was not a question of *will*, but *must*. Did this *parvenu* imagine, perhaps, that the major would give his beautiful child, his only daughter, to his son without his having to pay heavily for it? Oh, no, indeed! No gains without pains; if the honorary commercial adviser did not pay his debts and his son's, then there would be no engagement, for he, as father, would never give his consent. That would indeed be a fine thing if he gave his child to the first best suitor without any compensation. "No, no, that's not what was intended, that won't do at all."

The major talked himself into a rage over the matter to his wife, who vainly tried to calm him. "You don't know these shop-keeping creatures, they grow rich by haggling; their chief characteristic is avarice, and you see all that here. Do you suppose a decent man would ask what were the debts of the father and mother of his future daughter-in-law? He would simply pay them, and on the spot. And what does [Pg 313] this fellow say: 'Expect you both to-morrow to discuss affairs.' He ought to come to us, and ask for our daughter's hand on his son's behalf in the proper way, instead of which we are simply commanded to come to him. I, an old major, must receive instructions from a *parvenu*. He has not a trace of respect for my noble birth, my position, my name; he has the money-bags, so we must pipe to his tune. Well, I shall soon make him see how matters stand, I shall soon show him what an honour it is for him and his family if we let his son, who, as far as I know, is only a discharged lieutenant, marry our Hilda. I will soon open his eyes."

He walked up and down the room grumbling and cursing, but gradually joy in Hildegarde's engagement again got the upper hand, and earlier than usual he went off to his special table at the restaurant in order to relate the news and to receive congratulations on the happy event.

Next morning he set out on his journey; his wife had wanted to accompany him, but he would not allow this. "Fritz and I must first have a talk with the old man and arrange affairs. I will telegraph you how things are, and then you might come. I repeat, if the old fellow does not pay up at once, there will be no engagement."

Fritz, who met his father on the way, quite agreed with him. He had also received a telegram in which was expressed only a *desire* to help, and he was no less angry [Pg 314] than his father. "You are quite right in what you say, papa, there is only one thing to be done, we must simply threaten to take Hildegarde immediately home with us if he does not consent to everything we want. We must act very energetically, and show fight, but above all we must make the old fellow feel what an enormous social barrier divides us; then you see he will look small."

But the old manufacturer was very far removed from looking small.

In the conversation that had taken place between Hildegarde and Elsa, the former had considered it her duty to tell her new friend frankly about her family affairs, and to confess quite plainly how she had been sent year after year to Berlin to get a rich husband. With tears she confessed she loved George, but declared she must renounce him, for she could not endure that George should believe, even for a moment, that she loved him for his money. At first when Elsa heard this she assumed a somewhat distant air, then she felt the most sincere sympathy for Hildegarde, whose every word showed clearly and distinctly how good and true she was. Elsa tried to console her to the best of her ability, and assured her that George would not doubt her, but that his love would be all the greater when he heard what a sad life she had had. Elsa undertook to inform her father what Hildegarde had told her, and at the first moment he was quite overcome, and kept on saying to his son—"George, [Pg 315] leave the thing alone, give up all thoughts of Hildegarde, don't be drawn into that wretched family affair." But he made no further opposition after he had seen Hildegarde and had had an hour's conversation with her *tête-à-tête*. He took his son aside and said, "George, the girl's an angel, we must make her happy and compensate her for all she has gone through by a future without a care or worry."

So they had all taken counsel together as to how Hildegarde's relatives were to be helped. Hildegarde had told them the extent of the debts so far as she remembered it from her last visit home, and at last it was arranged that old Winkler should pay one half of the debts, and George, out of his own income, the other. Besides this, Winkler intended to put aside a certain sum every year, from which Hildegarde could make her parents an allowance, and so they would be removed from all pecuniary anxiety.

It was more difficult to arrange what was to be done about Fritz. George wanted to pledge himself to give his brother-in-law a monthly allowance, but Hildegarde shook her head at this. "There is really no object in doing that, George. If, in your kindness, you were to give him thousands and thousands, it would be so much money thrown away. The more Fritz has the more he needs. He would never manage on whatever he had; he would always borrow from us, he would not stop gambling, and [Pg 316] if we wouldn't help him he would borrow on I O U's, and would soon be as deeply in debt as he is to-day. It is sad for his own sister to have to say this, but I can only see one way of helping Fritz—he must leave the army and go abroad. He will never be any better until he works and earns his own living and so gets to understand the value of money."

"Hildegarde is right," agreed the old manufacturer. "Hildegarde is certainly the most sensible girl I have ever known, and if she, who knows her brother so well, says that there is no other means of helping him except a change of climate, then he shall have it. Let him go to America, I have business connections there, and can easily get him a post. He shall not starve, I will see to that all right, but he shall only get as much money as will keep him from want. He will therefore be forced to work for his living."

Thus all was settled and arranged when the major and his son arrived, and at the sight of the absolute calmness and firm determination which were visible in the manufacturer's whole bearing, they were quite unable to carry out their proposal and take the high hand. They could not explain why, but as they sat with the old man, they were almost ill at ease when he asked them about their debts, and told them in what way he proposed to settle them.

Fritz could hardly believe his ears when he was told he was to leave the army. He [Pg 317] opposed it as much as ever he could, but he was so deeply involved that he could not hang on for more than a few weeks. It would, therefore, be best for him after all to resign at once. But if he left the army there was really no object in paying his debts at once; the people could wait for them, he would be quite content to go on owing them money. He made this clear to old Winkler, who might thus save the money and give him a few more thousand marks for his journey.

"For you to gamble them away on board ship. No, there's no sense in that, and quite apart from that, in our plebeian circles it is considered honourable to fulfil one's obligations. Surely you, who belong to a class which is nicknamed nowadays 'the first class,' ought not to think differently in this matter. I should not have expected this of you."

Fritz could not help feeling uncomfortable, and both father and son were delighted when Elsa inquired whether lunch could not be served, and so brought the conversation to an end.

The major was in the seventh heaven: his debts were paid, he received an extra allowance, he had no longer any need to give his son any money, and henceforth he could live free from care. He did not, of course, quite like it that his son Fritz should have to go abroad, but if the old manufacturer insisted upon it, why one must agree to it, and perhaps he might find a rich wife there. In America there were still people [Pg 318] who thought aristocratic birth more than out-weighed gold, and, besides, America was not far off, he could be back again in a few days, if need be. He whispered all this to his son, when he was alone with him for a moment, and Fritz made the best of a bad bargain. Father and son thoroughly enjoyed the excellent luncheon of which they all partook, and appeared to take no notice of the somewhat cold, distant behaviour of the Winklers at the beginning of the interview.

Next day the manufacturer with his children and Hildegarde intended to go home.

He would indeed have gone on this day but George, who had given in his resignation, had invited the "Golden Butterflies" to a splendid banquet, and at six o'clock the whole of the corps of officers were assembled in a splendid suite of rooms in the best hotel in Berlin. George in his heart disliked all this ostentation, but on this occasion he had ordered the best and most expensive of everything. The French champagne flowed in streams, the finest wines, the best viands were set before them.

George as the host sat between the colonel and the major, and secretly he was immensely amused to notice how the former was beginning to think about his speech.

"What is he going to say?" thought George. "Does not the man see that this farewell banquet is a pure farce? There is not a single being at the table who is not delighted that I am going, and yet they all come here to stuff themselves at my expense, and to get more or less drunk."

[Pg 319] In a few words George bade his guests welcome, and wished them a pleasant evening. That was all he said. He could not bring himself somehow to say that he was delighted to be once more among his dear old comrades again, or something of the kind. He had only said what was absolutely necessary for the occasion, and, therefore, he was all the more curious to see how the colonel would reply to his remarks. The latter struck his glass, and rose, his example being followed by all the other officers.

"Gentlemen," began the colonel, amid profound silence, "we are to-day assembled for the last time to do honour to a beloved comrade, who is leaving not only us, but the army, to go into his father's business as worker and partner. Although it is usually the custom for the departing officer to be entertained by his corps, to-day it is otherwise, and it is we who are the guests and you the host, because we believe by this means to show you, dear Winkler, how delighted we are once more to have you in our midst. To invite you to a dinner would have been the ordinary etiquette of the regiment, but etiquette does not oblige us to accept your invitation. The fact that everyone of us is here is a clear and eloquent sign, dear Winkler, that all who are here have not a word to say against you. I cannot deny that there were at one time differences between you and the other officers, but to-day shows that all those have
[Pg 320] disappeared. And so, with sincere regret, we witness your departure from our midst, although you have only been here such a short time, and our wishes for your health and prosperity in the future are expressed in the toast. Three cheers for our former comrade, Lieutenant Winkler. Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

"Coldly as they received me into the regiment, coldly they bid me good-bye," thought George during the colonel's speech. "Not a single kindly word for me, merely a variation on the theme—what fine, good-natured fellows we are for coming here to-day on your account."

The hurrahs rang out, the band struck up a fanfare, and then the song, "Ich hatte einen Kamraden, einen bessern fandst du nicht."

"I am to have that as well," thought George, and a feeling of bitterness rose within him. "Lies and hypocrisy to the very end."

The colonel drew him into the conversation, but, while George was apparently listening to a description of an incident in the war, his thoughts were far away. He looked at his comrades who from joy at getting rid of him had drunk more than was good for them, and many of whom would soon be completely intoxicated. And suddenly a feeling of joy which he could not prevent came over him that in future he would no longer belong to a profession, the majority of whose members had not yet learned to work and to take life seriously; and who had not yet grasped the real nature of its task—that of educating the German youth.

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Transcriber's note

Obvious printer errors have been silently corrected. Original spelling was kept. Variant spellings were made consistent when a predominant usage was found.

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