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Title: Dividing Waters

Creator: I. A. R. Wylie

Release date: July 16, 2015 [EBook #49460]

Language: English

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# DIVIDING WATERS

BY

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"THE RAJAH'S PEOPLE," "MY GERMAN YEAR"

SECOND EDITION

MILLS & BOON, LIMITED
49 RUPERT STREET
LONDON, W.

*Published* 1911

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# DIVIDING WATERS

## BOOK I

### CHAPTER I
#### THE MISTAKES OF PROVIDENCE

The family Ingestre sat in conclave. That they sat together at all at any time other than a meal-time was in itself sufficient proof that the subject of their debate was unusually serious: their faces and attitudes added conclusive evidence.

The Reverend John Ingestre occupied his chair of state at the head of the long table. He was a middle-sized man, with narrow, sloping shoulders, which were at that particular moment drawn up into an uncomfortable hunch. When he spoke he pulled at his thin beard and glanced at his wife surreptitiously over his spectacles, as though seeking her advice or support—actions which gave his whole person an air of harassed nervousness.

Mrs. Ingestre did not return her husband's signals. She lay quietly on the sofa by the window, her hand half shading her face, and seemed absorbed in her own thoughts. Only once during the Rev. John's long and detailed statement did she give any sign of having heard. Then she shifted her position so that her grave scrutiny rested on the two younger members of the family. Perhaps she hoped to learn from their expressions what they were innerly experiencing, and therein no doubt she must have been successful, for their positions alone were expressive of much.

The boy—or young man, for he was at that uncertain age when boyhood and manhood meet—had his hands plunged in his pockets; his long legs were stretched out in front of him, his chin rested on his chest. Supreme and energiless despondency seemed to be imprinted in the very creases of his Norfolk coat.

The girl had her place at the table. Though she sat perfectly still, never turning her eyes from her father's face, there was something in her rigid attitude which suggested irritation and impatience. Her hands lay in her lap; only a close observer would have seen that they were not folded, but clenched, so that the knuckles stood out white.

"So you see, my dear children," the Rev. John said at last, coming to his peroration, "I felt it my duty to lay the case before you exactly as it stands. For a long time I hoped that it would not be necessary for me to do so—that a merciful Providence would spare me the pain of inflicting upon you so sharp a wound. Well, it has been ruled otherwise, and I only pray that you share with me my one consolation—the knowledge that it is the will of a Higher Power, and therefore all for the best."

He stopped and waited. In spite of the catastrophe which he had just announced, there was a trace of meek satisfaction in his manner, of which he seemed gradually to become conscious, for he turned to his wife with a note of apology in his thin voice:

"My dear, I have explained the matter correctly, I hope?"

"Quite correctly, I should think."

Mrs. Ingestre's hand sank from her face. It was a finely shaped hand, and whiter, if possible, than the dress she wore. Everything about her was beautiful and fragile—painfully fragile. The very atmosphere around her seemed laden with the perfume of a refined and nobly borne suffering.

"It seems to me there is no possible mistake," said the young man, getting up roughly. "We are ruined—that is the long and the short of the matter."

For a moment no one made any attempt to deny his angry statement. Then the Rev. John shook his head.

"You speak too strongly, my dear Miles," he corrected. "We are not what one would call ruined. I have still my stipend. There is no idea of—eh—starving, or anything of that sort; but the superfluous luxuries must be done away with, and—eh—one or two sacrifices must be brought."

He coughed, and looked at his daughter. Mrs. Ingestre looked at her also, and the pale, pain-worn face became illumined with tenderness and pity.

"Sacrifices," the Rev. John repeated regretfully. "Such, I fear, must be the payment for our misfortunes."

Nora Ingestre relaxed from her stiff attitude of self-restraint. The expression of her face said clearly enough: "The sermon is at an end, and the plate being handed round. How much am I expected to put in?"

"It was of your career I was thinking, my dear Miles," the Rev. John answered. "I am quite aware that your whole future depends on your remaining in the Army, therefore we have decided that—that sacrifices must be brought for you."

He hesitated again, and threw another glance at his wife's pale face.

"Nora, I am sure you see the necessity of what I say?"

His daughter started, as though he had awakened her from a reverie.

"Yes, I do," she said, with an abrupt energy. "We must all help each other as much as we can. I shall just work like a nigger."

"Eh—yes," said her father doubtfully. "I am sure you will. Of course, we shall have to dismiss some of the servants, and your mother will need—eh—more assistance than hitherto—and I know, dear Nora——" He coughed, and left the sentence unfinished.

Whether it was his manner or her mother's face which aroused her to closer attention, Nora Ingestre herself could not have said. She became suddenly aware that all three were looking at her, and that she was expected to say something.

"I don't quite understand," she said. "It is only natural that I should help all I can, only——"

It was her turn to stop short. She too had risen to her feet, and quite unconsciously she drew herself upright like a person preparing for attack from some as yet unknown quarter. Like her father, she was not above the middle height, but she had her mother's graceful, well-proportioned build, which made her seem taller than she really was, and added to that a peculiar resolute dignity that was all her own. It was, perhaps, to this latter attribute that she owed the unacknowledged respect in which she was held both by her father and brother. For it is a set rule that we must admire most what is in direct contrast to ourselves; and it had never been in the

Rev. John's power either to carry himself erect, or to give himself anything but the appearance of a meek and rather nervous man. It was owing to this inherent respect that he hesitated at the present moment. Perhaps he realised at the bottom of his heart that it was not an altogether fair proceeding to load his mistaken monetary speculations on the shoulders of a disinterested Providence, and that his family might have other, if secret, views as to the real responsibility. At any rate, he was not sufficiently convinced of his own absolute innocence to meet his daughter's grave, questioning eyes with either firmness or equanimity.

"My dear," he said, "we want you at home." And therewith he considered he had put the case both concisely and gently. But Nora continued to look at him, and he grew irritated because she did not seem able to understand.

"Surely you can see that—that there are certain things for which we have neither the time nor the money?" he said, drumming on the table with his thin fingers.

A deep wave of colour mounted Nora Ingestre's cheeks. She did not speak, however, until it had died away again, leaving her unusually pale.

"You mean—I must give up—everything?" she asked in a low voice.

"If by 'everything' you mean your musical studies—yes," her father returned impatiently. The next minute he relented, and, leaning forward, took her passive hand in his. "But surely it is not 'everything,'" he said. "Surely your home and your people are more to you than even this favourite pursuit? I know it is hard for you—it is indeed hard for us all; but if we kept our promise and sent you to London other things would have to pay for it—the dear old house, the garden, Miles's career. You see how it is? You know there is nothing for your real good that I would withhold from you if I could help it, dear child."

He waited, expecting her to throw herself into his arms in generous self-reproach at her own hesitation; but she said nothing, and there was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"And then time will not hang heavy on your hands," he went on, with forced cheerfulness. "Your mother will need you and I shall need you—good little amanuensis that you are! Is it not something to you that we all need you so much?"

"Yes," she said.

The monosyllable encouraged him, though it would have encouraged no one else.

"And, of course, in between whiles you will be able to keep up your music," he added, patting her hand.

This time there was not even a monosyllable to reassure him. Nora Ingestre stood motionless at her father's side, her eyes fixed straight ahead, her fine, resolute features set, and almost expressionless.

Miles swung impatiently on his heel.

"I can't think what you are making all this fuss about," he said. "You ought to be jolly glad that we can keep on the old place, and that you have such a decent home. I know lots of girls who would give their eyes to be in your shoes."

"Have I been making a fuss?"

She spoke perfectly quietly, without changing her position, but her question seemed to cause Miles fresh annoyance.

"I call it a fuss to stand there and say nothing," he said, with sound masculine logic. "And anyhow—what does it matter whether you can tinkle a few tunes on the old tin-kettle or not?"

"That is something you do not understand," she blazed out. It was as though he had unwittingly set fire to some hidden powder-mine in her character. She was breathing quickly and brokenly, and every line in her face betrayed a painfully repressed feeling which threatened to break out into passionate expression.

Mrs. Ingestre rose from her couch. When she stood upright she seemed to dominate them all, to command silence and respect, by the very dignity of her bearing.

"I think this has all lasted long enough," she said. "What is done cannot be undone. We must face matters as best we can. As your father says, it is the will of Providence, and as such we must accept it. Only"—she turned to Miles, and from the faintest possible inflection of irony her tone deepened to reproof—"there are some things you do not understand, dear boy, and which you had better leave to wiser heads. Perhaps I understand better. At any rate, I should like to speak to Nora alone."

Thus she virtually dismissed the masculine members of the family. Miles shrugged his shoulders, and went out into the garden whistling. The Rev. John rose, and gathered up the business papers which he had brought in with him.

"I am sure that your mother will show it is all for the best," he said weakly.

At the door he turned and looked back over his spectacles.

"Remember always what we have both tried to impress upon you—it is the will of Providence," he said. "We must not kick against the pricks."

He then went out, leaving the two women alone.

## CHAPTER II
### "WANDERLUST"

For some minutes mother and daughter did not speak. Nora had turned her back, and was gazing out on to the pleasant country garden with eyes that saw neither the flowers nor the evening shadows which lengthened out over the lawn. She was still too profoundly occupied in the effort to appear indifferent, to cover over that one slip of feeling, to notice what was going on about her. She hated herself for having shown what she felt, she hated herself for feeling as she did; but no amount of hatred or self-condemnation would retrieve the one or change the other, and when she at last turned, aroused by the prolonged silence, the signals of anger and resentment still burned in her cheeks and eyes.

"Oh, I am a wretch," she cried impetuously. "Dearest, don't look so grave and distressed. It isn't your fault that you have such a disagreeable daughter. There, I ought to be a help and comfort, and instead——"

"An old woman does not need so much help and comfort as a young one," Mrs. Ingestre interrupted gently. "Just at present I am not suffering one-tenth of what you are suffering. And, dear Nora, don't treat me like some frail old wreck that must be shielded at all costs from the rough winds. Don't stand there and swallow up everything you are feeling because you are afraid of hurting me. It will only rankle all the worse. I would rather have your full confidence, however painful it may be. Come here and sit down beside me. Tell me everything you are thinking and feeling, honest Injun!"

The "honest Injun" brought a smile to Nora's eyes. Like everything else that she said or did, Mrs. Ingestre stamped the schoolboy phrase with an exotic, indefinable charm that was all her own. Yet beneath the half-gay appeal there lay a note of command, and Nora drew nearer awkwardly and hesitatingly, bereft for the moment of her youthful assurance and thrust back to the school days which at the age of nineteen are not so far away. She took the white outstretched hand and stood with bent head, frowning at the carpet. Suddenly she knelt down and buried her face in her mother's lap.

"I feel like a trapped rabbit," she murmured indistinctly.

A very faint smile touched Mrs. Ingestre's lips.

"A trapped rabbit, Nora? And who has trapped you, pray?"

"You have, and you know it. You always do!"

"Really, dear, it would have to be a very old and shortsighted rabbit to allow me to trap it, and you are neither. You must explain."

Nora lifted her face. She was laughing, but she was also very near crying.

"I mean—that is how you make me feel," she said. "I can defy other people when they want to do any soul-exploring on my territory. I just shut my mouth and my heart, and leave them out in the cold. But you are different. You mesmerise me till I not only have to tell you what I am feeling, but I positively *want* to—even though it is the most disgraceful, most disreputable feeling possible."

"And just now——?"

"It was a thought."

"What sort of a thought?"

"A dreadful one."

"Couldn't you tell me?"

"Of course I can—I must—but——"

"Well?"

"Do you want to know exactly?"

"Word for word."

"I was thinking what a duffer father is—was, I mean."

A complete silence. Mrs. Ingestre stroked her daughter's hand and stared sightlessly into the deepening shadows. The smile had died from her lips.

"Go on," she said at last.

"I don't think there is anything else. I always think that when father talks about Providence and—and that sort of thing. I feel sometimes that if Providence took human shape and was in the room at the time I should wink—I am not sure I don't wink inside me, anyhow."

She waited, and then, as Mrs. Ingestre said nothing, she went on disconsolately:

"I know I am awful, darling. I wonder if other people have shocking ideas too, or whether I am the wicked exception?"

"I don't think so," Mrs. Ingestre said. "One can't help one's thoughts, you know."

"No, one can't; can one? The more one sits on them, the more uproarious they get. Are you cross?"

"No."

"Do you—ever have thoughts like that?"

"Nora, I am not feeling in the least like a trapped rabbit, if that's what you mean."

Nora laughed outright. Her youth and buoyant spirits won the upper hand for the moment, but for no longer. The actual subject of their conversation interposed itself between her humour and herself.

"Why did father try and make money in Mexico?" she demanded suddenly and sharply. "We were rich enough before, and now we are so poor that we have to give up everything that makes life worth living, in order to live."

"My dear child, do you really think that?"

"No, I don't *think* that. If I thought, I daresay I should see that, as the world goes, I am a very lucky girl. But I *feel*—awful! And the feelings always count most with me."

Mrs. Ingestre nodded to herself.

"They count most with all normal people," she said; "and those who govern their lives by their heads are not, as a rule, either the happiest or the cleverest. Still, Nora, is it such a sacrifice?"

"Yes."

"Is the music so dear to you that it is the only thing which makes life worth living?"

Nora did not answer, and with a firm, gentle hand Mrs. Ingestre tilted her daughter's head backwards, so that she could look straight into the overcast grey eyes. A very faint smile played about the corners of her own mouth.

"Nora, you know, a few months ago, when we promised to send you up to London to begin your studies, we were comparatively rich people. Rich people can afford luxuries, and our pet luxury was to imagine that our little girl was a genius who was going to show the world great things. We meant to give you every chance—we would have seen that our ship lacked nothing to make its first passage in public waters a success. Well, we are poor now, and the first luxury which we must part with is that fond hope. You and I must face the fact—you are a sweet musician, not a genius."

"Mother, you knew that all the time—as well as I did."

A pale rose sprang to Mrs. Ingestre's cheeks. Quite unconsciously she avoided her daughter's challenging eyes.

"Mother, why did you pretend to think otherwise?" Nora went on. "Did you believe me so silly as to imagine myself anything more than an amateur? Why, of course I knew. I had only to compare myself with others."

"And yet you let us think and talk about you as a genius!" Mrs. Ingestre interposed.

Nora nodded defiantly.

"I was a humbug," she declared. "I wanted to go to London. It seemed the only way."

"Wasn't that a rather disreputable way?"

"Not more disreputable than yours. I remember, when father complained about the useless expense you told him it was a sin against Providence not to encourage Genius. It was then I first made the discovery that when you are most serious you are really laughing—at father and me and every one."

"Nora! Nora!" The tone of mild reproof died away Mother and daughter looked each other in the eyes and laughed. When she had done laughing, Mrs. Ingestre bent down and kissed the girl lightly on the forehead.

"You pry too deep to be an altogether very respectful person," she said; "but since you have pryed, I must make the best of it and confess. I knew your father would not understand my ideas, so I too humbugged a little—just a very little. I wanted you to go to London, and afterwards into the world. It was the only way."

"And now this is the end of it all!"

Nora Ingestre rose and stood by her mother's side. Her voice rang with all the protest and despair of which youth is so capable—very real protest and very real despair, whole-hearted and intense, as is the way with youth.

"It wasn't the music," she went on. "I loved it, of course, but I wanted to see the world and people more than anything else. I wanted the world so badly, mother. I felt like a caged animal that sees the forests and the plains through its prison bars. I wanted to get out and be free. Oh, you can't understand—you can't!"

Mrs. Ingestre stirred suddenly, as though a wound had been touched with rough fingers.

"I do understand," she said. But Nora was too young, above all, too absorbed in her own griefs, to hear all that was hidden in her mother's words.

"At any rate, no one else would understand," she went on. "Father wouldn't, Miles wouldn't, and the whole village wouldn't. They would all say I was a New Woman, or unwomanly, or something—why, I don't know. I don't care whether I have a vote or not. I can cook and I can sew; I love children. All that sort of thing is womanly, isn't it? Isn't it womanly to want to live, and to know what life means? Nobody thinks it strange that Miles, though he has no talent for anything except loafing, should travel, should live away from home and get to know other people. It is all for his development! But I am not to develop, it seems. Perhaps development isn't womanly. Perhaps the only right thing for me to do is to look after the flowers and worry the cook and bore myself through my days with tea-parties and tennis-parties and occasional match-making dances, until somebody asks me to be his wife, and I marry him to save myself from turning into a vegetable!"

She stopped, breathless with her fierce torrent of sarcasm and bitterness. Her cheeks were flushed, her hands clenched; there were tears in her bright eyes. Mrs. Ingestre rose and followed her daughter to the window, whither she had wandered in her restless energy.

"How long have you been thinking all this, Nora?" she asked.

"Ever since I left school and Miles went to Sandhurst. Until then it all seemed fair enough. He had been to school and I had been to school. But after that, just when I was beginning to learn because I loved it, just when I was beginning to see things and understand them—then I was brought home—here—and there was an end to it."

Mrs. Ingestre put her arm about her daughter's shoulders.

"And then you remembered that you were musical?" she said.

"And you discovered that I was a genius!" came the retort.

Mrs. Ingestre laughed quietly.

"I see that we must not throw stones at each other, or our glass houses will suffer," she said. "And, after all, it does not matter why either of us wanted it, or how we managed. You were to go to London and see a little of the world——"

"Don't talk about it, mother!"

"Only a little, perhaps, but more than your whole future promises you now, poor child. Now you will have to stop here and vegetate."

Nora turned and clasped her mother in a tumultuous embrace.

"What a brute I must seem!" she exclaimed. "And yet I *do* love you, dearest. I believe I love you more than most daughters do their mothers, and I don't believe that I am really more selfish—only, I can't hide what I feel, and I feel such a lot. Are you hurt?"

Mrs. Ingestre shook her head.

"It is an old woman's privilege to pretend that she has a reason to feel bitter," she said, "but I am not in the least bitter, because, you see, I understand. I understood even before you said anything, and so I made up my mind that you should be given an alternative——"

"An alternative, mother?"

"——To staying here; and Captain Arnold."

A sudden silence fell on both. Mrs. Ingestre, under cover of the twilight, observed her daughter sharply. She saw that though Nora's face had grown grave it showed no sign of any profound feeling, and she took the quiet, undisturbed colour as an answer to a question which even she had never ventured to ask.

"And so," she went on after a moment, "I wrote to my old friend, Fräulein Müller, about you, and she answered two or three days ago, and said she knew of an excellent position as companion to a lady in Karlsburg. She thought it would suit you admirably. You would be treated as one of the family, and have plenty of time to go on with your own studies. Would you like it?"

The proposal came so suddenly, and yet in such a matter-of-fact tone, that Nora caught her breath and looked up at her mother in blank surprise.

"You mean," she began slowly, "that I should go and live in a German family?"

"Yes."

"With a lot of fat, greasy, gobbling Germans?"

"Do you know any Germans?"

"No—at least there was our German music-master at school, and *he* was fat and greasy, and I am sure he must have gobbled. He must have done. They all do."

"You used to say he played like an angel," Mrs. Ingestre interposed.

"So he did. But I hated him all the same. I hate all Germans."

Her tone rang with a sort of school-girl obstinacy. Her attitude, with lifted chin and straight shoulders, was eloquent with national arrogance and scorn.

Mrs. Ingestre turned away.

"I shall write to Fräulein Müller and tell her to make all arrangements," she said. "I think, if everything proves suitable, that you had better go to Karlsburg."

"Mother! You haven't even given me the choice!"

"I do not think it wise to do so," Mrs. Ingestre answered gravely. "You are right, Nora; you must see the world. You must go away from here, not just for the sake of the music, the change, and excitement, but in order that your heart may grow wider, in order to learn to love the good that lies outside your own little sphere. There are great things, great people outside Delford, Nora—yes, and outside England. You must learn to know them."

The girl's face flushed crimson.

"At the bottom we all despise foreigners and foreign ways," she said in self-defence. "Father does, Miles does, the Squire does. And they have all travelled; they have seen for themselves."

"They have travelled with their eyes open and their hearts closed," Mrs. Ingestre answered.

"How do you know, mother? You have never been out of England."

Mrs. Ingestre shook her head. A rather melancholy smile passed over her wan features.

"No," she said; "I have never been out of England, but I have been often, very often, ill, and during the long hours I have travelled great distances, and I have begun to think that God cannot surely have reserved all the virtues for us English. I fancy even the poor benighted Germans must have their share of heaven."

Nora laughed outright.

"I expect they have, now I come to think of it," she admitted gaily. "Mother, you are a much better Christian than father, though you won't call every one 'dearly beloved,' and you are yards better than I am. I can't help it—I despise all foreigners, especially——"

She stopped abruptly, and Mrs. Ingestre smiled.

"Still, you will try Karlsburg. It will be an experience for you, and you will hear good music. The family is a very old one, and perhaps the members, being of noble birth, may gobble less than the others."

"All Germans are of noble birth," Nora observed scornfully.

"So much the better for them," Mrs. Ingestre returned. "Are you willing to try? You know the alternative."

"May I think it over, mother?"

"Yes, you may think over it, if you like. It is, after all, only a question of your willingness."

"That means you have made up your mind?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Ingestre saw the strong young face set into lines of defiance. She went back to the sofa and lay down with a sigh.

"Little Nora," she said, almost under her breath, "you know it is not my custom to preach. You won't think, therefore, that I am just 'talking' when I tell you: years ago I would have given anything—anything—to have had this chance."

For the first time in their long interview the girl stopped listening to the self-pitying confusion of her thoughts. The elder woman's voice had penetrated her youthful egoism, and she turned with that curious tugging at the heart which we experience when we have unexpectedly heard a smothered cry of pain break from lips usually composed in lines of peace and apparent content.

"Mother!" Nora exclaimed. The room was now in almost complete shadow. She came closer and bent over the quiet face. The atmosphere was heavy with the scent of roses, and it flashed through Nora's mind as she stood there that her mother was like a rose—pale and faded, but still beautiful, still breathing a wonderful perfume of purity and sweetness.

"Mother!" she repeated, strangely awe-struck.

Mrs. Ingestre opened her eyes and smiled.

"I am very tired," she said. "I think I could sleep a little. Go and think it over. I want you to be willing."

Nora bent and kissed her.

"If you wish it, I am willing," she said with impulsive, whole-hearted surrender. She crept out on tiptoe, and for a few minutes all was quiet in the great shadowy room. Then the door opened again, and the Rev. John entered and peered round short-sightedly. He saw that his wife's eyes were closed, and, since it is not kind to waken a weary invalid, he merely knocked some books off the table and coughed. Truth to tell, it annoyed him that his wife should have chosen that identical moment to rest. He wanted to talk to her, but since in spite of all his indirect efforts she remained quiet, he went out again, a disconsolate victim of his own gentle consideration.

But Mrs. Ingestre had not been asleep. Her eyes were shut, but the eyes of her mental vision were open. They were watching sunlit panoramas of long rivers with mountain banks and frowning ruins, glorious, heaven-inspiring cathedral spires and great cities. The ears of her imagination had not heard the Rev. John's clumsy movements. They were listening to the song of the ocean, the confusion of a strange tongue, the rich *crescendo* of a wonderful music.

Mrs. Ingestre had left the room and the vicarage and the village far behind, and was travelling swiftly through a world which she had never seen and—since for her life was near its close—would never see. And as she travelled, the same thought repeated itself to her with stern persistency:

"Whatever it costs you, she must go. You must not, dare not keep her."

## CHAPTER III
### AN EXPERIMENT

Breakfast with the Ingestres was a movable and unsociable feast. The various members of the family came down when it suited them, the only punishment being the inevitable one of cold eggs and bitter tea, and conversation was restricted to the barest necessities. The Rev. John was usually engrossed in parochial letters, Mrs. Ingestre was never present at all, and Miles only at such a time when it pleased him. Thus Nora, choosing on the morning following the momentous interview to be an early riser, found little difficulty in making her escape. The Rev. John was more absorbed than usual in his post, since it contained not only letters dealing with his cure of souls, but also some disagreeable business facts which he swallowed with his tea in melancholy gulps.

Nora kissed him lightly on the high forehead as she ran toward the open French window. Rather to her surprise, the customary caress seemed to arouse her father from his reflections. He looked up and blinked, like a man who is trying to remember some important matter.

"My dear," he said, before Nora had reached the lawn, "is it really true that you want to go abroad? Your mother was talking to me about it last night."

"We were thinking about it," Nora admitted, fidgeting nervously with the blind-cord. "Mother said she thought it would be good for me."

"But, my dear child, what shall we do without you?" her father complained.

Nora made an almost imperceptible movement of impatience. She knew of what her father was thinking, and it did not move her to any great degree of sympathy.

"You will manage all right," she said. "Mr. Clerk will help you with your letters." And then, to cut the conversation short, she went out into the garden and along the gravel pathway towards the road.

The sun shone gloriously. All the charm of an English summer morning lay in the air, and Nora drew in great breaths with a joyous, unconscious triumph in her own fresh youth and health. The garden was the one place in the village which she really loved. The ugly, modern red-brick church, the straggling "square," with its peppermint bull's-eye monument to some past "glorious victory," in which the inhabitants of Delford were dimly supposed to have had their honourable share, the stuffy cottages, interspersed here and there by an ivy-overgrown residence of some big-wig of the neighbourhood—these features were unaccountably connected in Nora's mind with her father's sermons, the drone of the organ, and the dull piety of Sundays. But the garden was all her mother's. Nora believed that within its peaceful limits the forgotten and despised fairies of ancient lore took refuge from the matter-of-fact bigots who formed Delford's

most respectable community. She had even christened a certain rose-corner the "Fairy Castle," and it amused her riotous young fancy to imagine an indignant and horrified Queen Mab scampering across the lawn in disorganised flight, before the approach of the enemy in the form of Mrs. Clerk, the curate's wife, or Mrs. Chester of the Manor. The garden was, as it were, Mrs. Ingestre's self-created Eden in the drab-coloured land of the Philistines, and even the Rev. John was an intruder and disturber of its poetic peace. Nora felt all this, and in a dim, unformed way understood why her mother's roses were different to the roses in other and richer gardens, why the very atmosphere had its own peculiar perfume, the silence its own peculiar mystery. She felt that her mother had translated herself into the flowers, and that the depths of her quiet, unfathomable heart were revealed in their beauty and sweetness. She felt that if she could have read their language, the very daisies on the lawn would have lifted the veil which hung between her and the woman who seemed to her the most perfect on earth. For, in spite of their close and tender relationship, Mrs. Ingestre's inner life was for her daughter a sort of Holy of Holies, into which no human being had ever ventured.

Thus, once beyond the reach of her father's voice, Nora lingered willingly between the rose beds, making mental comments on the progress of the various favourites and for the moment forgetting the matter which was weighing heavily on her mind. At the gate opening out on to the road, however, she pulled herself sharply together, with a sudden gravity on her young face. Either the church steeple visible above the trees, or the sight of an inquisitive face peering through the blinds of the house opposite, reminded her that the frontier of Eden was reached, and that the dull atmosphere of respectability was about to encompass her. She went quickly through the village. Most of the villagers touched their caps as she passed, and Mrs. Clerk, early bird of charity that she was, attempted to waylay her, to discuss the desirability of procuring parish relief for bedridden old Jones, and, incidentally, of course, to discover how far the pleasantly lugubrious reports respecting the Ingestres' disabled fortunes were founded on fact. Nora, however, avoided her enemy with the assistance of an absent-minded smile and increased speed, and managed to reach her destination without further interruption.

Her destination was a stile which led out on to a narrow pathway over the fields. She was fond of the spot, partly because if you turned your back to the east it was quite possible to forget that such things as Delford or the church or the peppermint bull's-eye monument existed, partly because westwards the limitless stretch of undulating fields seemed to suggest freedom and the great world beyond, of which Nora thought so much. On this particular morning it was not the view which attracted her, as her rather unusual conduct testified. She arranged her ruffled brown hair, stooped, and tightened a shoelace, undid the second shoelace and retied it with methodical precision. Then some one said "Good morning, Nora," and she sprang upright with her cheeks red with surprise or exertion, or anything else the beholder chose to suppose.

"Good morning, Robert," she said.

The new-comer took the friendly, outstretched hand.

"I was coming to pay a disgracefully early morning call," he said. "I am awfully glad we have met."

"I knew you would come over the fields this way," she said. "I came because I wanted to see you."

He flushed crimson with pleasure.

"That was decent of you, Nora. You are not always so kind."

"This is an exceptional occasion," she answered gravely.

She perched herself on the stile and sat there gazing thoughtfully in front of her. In that moment she made a sweet and pleasing picture of English girlhood. The sunlight played through the trees on to her hair, picking out the shining red-gold threads, and touching with warmer glow the softly tinted skin. The clean-cut, patrician features, dark-arched eyebrows, and proud, rather full lips seemed to contrast strangely with the extreme simplicity of her flowered muslin frock. And indeed she came of another race of women than that of which Delford and its inhabitants were accustomed—something finer, more delicate, more keenly tempered. It was almost impossible to think of her as the Rev. John's daughter—quite impossible as Miles Ingestre's sister. One could only understand the small, aristocratic features when one remembered that Mrs. Ingestre was her mother. Captain Arnold remembered the fact keenly that moment.

"I declare you are Mrs. Ingestre's miniature!" he exclaimed. "This morning, one would positively think she had been made twenty years younger, and perched up there as a surprise-packet."

Nora turned on him with a pleased smile.

"This is a nice compliment," she said; "but I have no time for such things just now. Any moment Mrs. Clerk might scurry round the corner, and then my reputation would be gone for ever. She would probably tell every one that I had come out to meet you on purpose."

"Which is true, by the way, isn't it?" he inquired, smiling.

"Yes, quite true; only my reason is respectable—not the sort of reason that Mrs. Clerk would put down to my credit."

He came closer and, leaning his elbows on the cross-bars of the stile, looked up into her face.

"I hope it is a nice reason," he said.

"No," she answered, "it is a serious reason, and not in the least nice. I expect you have already heard something about it, haven't you?"

He hesitated.

"Of course—I have heard rumours," he said. "As a rule I ignore such things, but I could not altogether ignore this; it concerned you and yours too closely."

"Besides, it is true," she added.

"True, Nora?"

"Yes, quite true. We are ruined."

"My dear girl!"

"At least, comparatively ruined," she corrected.

For a moment he was silent, apparently intent on the study of his own strong square hands linked together in front of him.

"How did it happen?" he asked at last.

"I don't know," she answered impatiently. "Father bought some shares that aren't any good. I suppose he wanted to make money." Her tone was unconsciously scornful.

"We all want to do that," Arnold observed in defence.

The strongly arched eyebrows went up a degree.

"At any rate," she said, "it is frightfully rough on mother. Her life was hard enough before—what with ill-health and that sort of thing. Now it will be ten times worse." She clenched her hands in a sudden passionate protest. "I can't help it," she went on, "it seems to me all wrong. She is the best, the cleverest woman I have ever met. She ought to be the wife of a genius or a great, good man—not father's wife. Father ought to have married Mrs. Clerk. Why did she marry him? It is wicked, but it is the thought which comes into my mind every time I see them together. And now, when I think that she will have to scrape and save as well I——" She stopped short and looked at her companion defiantly. "I suppose you are very shocked," she said. "That comes of always feeling as though you were one of the family. I have to say just what is passing in my mind."

"I am glad you have so much confidence in me," Arnold answered seriously. "All the same, I do not think that you are just to your father. He is a thoroughly good man. Many people would think Mrs. Ingestre very lucky."

"Perhaps they *do* think so," Nora said, with indifference. "That is because no one about here is capable of understanding her. In any case, it's no good talking about it. This latest trouble is quite enough."

"I suppose Miles will be able to stay in the Army?" Arnold asked.

"Oh, yes, that's settled."

"What about your studies? They will have to be given up, of course?"

"Why 'of course'?" she flashed out.

"Because there won't be enough money for them," he explained in a matter-of-fact tone. "For my part," he went on, "I shall be glad. I dreaded the thought of coming home on leave and finding you gone. It would have been sickening."

"It will be still more 'sickening' now," she said, rather revengefully. "I am going away for a long time, and to a place a long way off."

"Nora! In Heaven's name where and why?"

She laughed at his astonished, troubled face.

"To Karlsburg, in Germany—as a companion."

"To Germany! Why do you want to go there?"

"Because I do not want to vegetate here."

"Nora, you will hate it. You will be ill with home-sickness. You don't know what it will be like. It is not as though you will be among your own country-people. You will hate their manners, their customs, their ways, and they will treat you like a servant. Little Nora, I can't bear the thought of it."

He spoke earnestly, almost incoherently.

Nora shook her head.

"There is no other alternative," she said.

"There is one other alternative, Nora. Will you be my wife?"

He had taken her hand, and she did not attempt to draw it back. Nor had she changed colour. Her clear eyes studied his thin, rather gaunt face, and passed on with frank criticism to his tall figure, loosely built and rather stooping, in the grey Norfolk suit.

"Nora," he said sternly, "I have asked you a question. You do not need to look at me like that. I am not different to what I usually am."

"But I am looking at you in a different light," she said.

He seemed to think that she was laughing at him, or that she had not taken him seriously. A deep flush mounted his sun-burnt cheeks.

"Nora, I am very much in earnest," he said, his grasp on her hand tightening. "Though you are a child you must have felt long ago that I cared for you as something more than my little comrade. I love you, and I have loved you a long time. Will you be my wife?"

She shook her head gravely and regretfully.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not love you."

"Are you sure? How can you tell? You know nothing of love."

"No," she agreed. "That is the very reason I will not marry you."

He let her hand go and stood looking at her with his lips tightly compressed, as though on a storm of protest.

"Would you mind if I was quite honest?" she went on. "I would rather tell you everything, even if it makes you think me bad and heartless."

"I shall never think that of you," he said painfully.

"Well, then, I did know you cared for me," she continued. "I was always ashamed of myself for knowing. It seemed conceited of me to imagine that a grown-up man should want such a child as I am—still, I couldn't help it. I felt it. It seems one does feel that sort of thing. It is like electricity in the air. Anyhow, it did not worry me very much. I made up my mind that one of these days I would marry you. It seemed so probable and natural that I should. We had known each other since I was a baby and you a school-boy; our families were connected; we lived in the same neighbourhood; we saw each other at regular intervals; we never quarrelled—or hardly ever; we knew each other's faults better than most people do who marry. Everything seemed to point in the same direction. But I was such a school-girl. I felt that there was heaps of time for me to grow to love you—or perhaps find out that I loved you already. You see, I wasn't sure. I liked to be with you; but then, I like to be with any one who is jolly and amusing, so that wasn't a sure test. Yesterday I knew that there was no time left me. I guessed that I should have to decide between you and Karlsburg. It sounds horrid, but it is the truth. And I could not decide—I simply could not. Then I thought—perhaps if you *asked* me, perhaps if you told me about *your* love, it would awaken some sort of an answer in me—I should feel some sort of signal such as I should imagine a woman would feel if the being with whom she is destined to spend her life, and perhaps more, stood at her side and held her hand. So I came out here, so that you would ask me to be your wife. Are you angry?"

He shook his head, frowning straight before him.

"No."

"It may sound heartless," she went on; "I did not mean it to be. I thought it would be better if everything was spoken out clearly between us. I knew you loved me, and I cared for you—I cared for you enough to be glad if I found I loved you. For my own sake I should have been glad. I know my life would be safe in your hands—that you are all an English gentleman need be, but——"

"Now comes the 'but,' he said, with bitterness.

"It is no good," she said. "I can't pretend, can I? When you took my hand, when you spoke, I felt nothing—absolutely nothing, or, perhaps, only a little more critical than usual. I noticed, for instance, that you stoop. It had never struck me before. I tell you that because it shows you just how I feel."

"Thank you," he said.

She put her hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be angry," she pleaded. "I *do* care for you."

"Then, if you care for me, couldn't you give me a chance—won't you trust yourself to me,

Nora? Love will come little by little."

He had taken her hand again, and she felt that he trembled with restrained feeling.

"I have an idea that love never comes little by little," she said.

They were a long time silent. Arnold had buried his face on his arms on the cross-bars. Presently he looked up, and met her sorrowful gaze with pale composure.

"So it is to be Karlsburg?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"Nora, I shan't give up hope."

"It wouldn't be fair of me to say 'don't.'"

"Still, when you come back?" ...

"I can't promise anything," she said, but her eyes were full of pity and kindness. "I am so sorry, Robert."

"That's all right, dear. You can't help it." He pressed her hand a last time. "I won't come on now. You understand—I would rather be alone. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She watched him till he was out of sight. A tear rolled down her cheek. She rubbed it quickly and impatiently away. Then she sprang down and went home. She felt shaken and vaguely regretful, and was filled with the one desire to be with her mother.

Mrs. Ingestre was in the garden when Nora reached the vicarage. She was looking paler than usual, but she greeted her daughter with the customary grave, affectionate smile.

"You are out early to-day," she said.

Nora came and slipped her arm through her mother's.

"I have something serious to tell you," she said. "Robert has asked me to be his wife."

She spoke quickly, breathlessly, as though disburdening her heart of an uncomfortable load. Mrs. Ingestre said nothing, but waited quietly for what was to come. She held a bunch of roses, and if Nora had been less self-absorbed, she would have seen that the white hand trembled.

"I wanted him to propose to me," Nora went on with her confession. "I wanted to find out if I cared—I wanted to care, but—I don't—not enough. So I said 'No.' I am glad it is over."

Mrs. Ingestre pressed the arm resting on her own.

"And I am glad that you have said 'no,'" she said. "I should always have been afraid if it had been 'yes' that Karlsburg and vegetation had given the casting vote. It is dangerous to treat marriage as an escape loop-hole. Sometimes it means the tragedy of a lifetime."

They talked of other things, as people do who have touched on a subject too near the heart's innermost and untrodden places, but Mrs. Ingestre had unconsciously lifted a corner of the veil. The words "a tragedy of a lifetime" remained ineffaceable, and, though they had been untouched with self-pity or bitterness, Nora believed she understood.

From that moment she saw in her mother's face, words, and acts a new meaning—the revelation of a harsh punishment nobly and patiently accepted.

## CHAPTER IV
### OUTWARD BOUND

After the final decision, events moved swiftly in Nora Ingestre's life. It was almost as though Mrs. Ingestre was afraid delay might develop imperceptibly into a gradual surrender to the protests of her husband and the scoffing criticisms of her son. The former treated Nora's journey as a sort of soul-contaminating emigration into the land of the Moabites—a matter full of spiritual danger for her, and, incidentally, of annoyance for him. During the six weeks that passed in correspondence between Delford and Karlsburg and in busy preparations, he varied the table conversation with anxious appeals to a watchful, if occasionally inexplicable Providence on behalf of his dearest child and a fretful review of his own crippled condition without her assistance.

"God forbid that I should criticise my fellow-creatures," was his usual introductory sentence, "but foreigners are not as we. They have ways and customs which I cannot believe are well-pleasing in His sight. Do not, my child, be led astray by the creeping influence of example; do not surrender the proud and glorious tenets of your country because you see many, less fortunate, following other paths than those you have been taught to tread. They may seem fair, but remember the end is not here. Be careful that a light and frivolous conception of a terrible God does not taint your blood. I shall think of you always, dear child, but most of all on Sundays, in

our beloved church, when I shall pray that you too are joining in the universal praise in some suitable place of worship."

After which he was wont to remark that his sermon was not yet copied out, and on Nora having offered to perform the task, only too thankful that her soul's condition should cease to be made the subject for an after-dinner's conversation, he would draw her to him and kiss her.

"What shall I do without my right hand?" he usually added, with a grave and melancholy shake of the head.

It was then Miles's turn to take up the ball and keep it rolling after his own methods and ideas. References to fat Germans and to people who chose to associate with that sort of foreign bounder rather than stay at home with decent English people were plentiful, and became tiresome even in their variations. But alike to her brother's pungent sarcasm and her father's periods Nora bore the same determined front. She was on her mother's side, blindly and devotedly, and in spite of the fact that at the bottom of her heart she shared the prejudices of the masculine element in her family. She had the firm conviction that her mother was right, and felt, moreover, that anything—even Karlsburg—was better than the dreary Puritan monotony of her present life.

As for Mrs. Ingestre, she said little, but went on quietly with the necessary arrangements and ignored the constant, if indirect, attacks of her husband and son. Neither ventured to criticise her plans to her face. Miles lived in a wholesome shamefaced awe of his mother's dignity and keener insight into his own weaknesses; the Rev. John had his private reasons for caution. He had, in fact, waged one battle royal with his wife, and had been momentarily forced to realise that for twenty-five years he had been living with a master who had acted willingly as his slave. Not that the awakening was more than momentary. When he first recovered from the shock of finding himself confronted by an iron wall of opposition, he had dozed back into the old delusion that he was sent with a divine mission to be the guide and support to a frail and helpless woman. But there were a few words uttered in the course of a short and painful interview which the Rev. John could not forget. They rankled in his mind as the proof of the injustice, ingratitude, and perversity of the best of women.

"We look at things from a different standpoint," Mrs. Ingestre had said wearily. "You regard the world and all that it has to offer in beauty and happiness as something to be hated and avoided. You do hate the world. You boast of the fact. I am different. I believe that I was put into the world to enjoy it to the uttermost power of my capability, that every day in which I had not seen or done something new or experienced some fresh wonder was a day wasted. I believed all this in spite of my home and upbringing. I simply waited for the time when I should be allowed to live as I understood living. I married you—and then too late I saw that your ideas and mine clashed. It was a mistake, John, but in all justice you must admit it was a mistake which you have never had to feel. I have done my best to smother my wishes and instincts because I realised that it was not your fault that I had seen more in you than was really there. I have stood by you loyally—I felt it was my duty to do so even at the cost of my own individuality. *I* had made a mistake. But it was a mistake none the less, John, and it is one for which Nora shall not suffer. My responsibility to her is greater than it is to you. She is my daughter. She shall live as her character requires—as my character required. She shall not be stunted and dwarfed in her growth. This is the first time I have ever opposed you. I do so because I must."

And, strangely enough, the Rev. John had found nothing to say. He prayed very earnestly for his wife against the hydra-headed monster of worldliness and vanity which he firmly believed had taken hold upon her soul, but from that moment his protest confined itself to an increased gravity in her presence and the indirect reproach of his after-dinner orations.

Thus time slipped past, and almost before she knew it the day of departure dawned for Nora. In the fresh autumnal air and bright sunshine she forgot the pangs of the previous night, when she had wept a few tears of regret and vague remorse. In the darkness she had reproached herself to the point of believing that to desert her father and the copying of his sermons was a piece of unfilial selfishness. Even Robert Arnold appeared to her in a new light—that light which our "good-night" thoughts, first cousins to "last" thoughts, cast about those dear to us. He seemed very dear to her at midnight. A dozen episodes, grave and gay, in their common life recurred to her, also illuminated by the same tender regret. A year's parting from him caused her almost intolerable heartache, the more so because she had repulsed him and the love after which she began to hunger. "If he will only wait, I am sure I shall grow to love him," she confided to her damp pillow, more than half convinced that the love had come already, startled to life by the fear of loss and separation.

But the morning sunshine is a spritely, cold-hearted magician. As the shaky old four-wheeled cab, glorified in the village by the name of "the brougham," rolled over the uneven cobbles, she found herself nodding a cheerful, almost triumphant, farewell to the church and the monument. They were in her eyes the symbols of a life she was leaving behind her, like the gates of a not intolerable prison. She was quite sorry that Mrs. Clerk failed to be on her usual watchful guard at the window. Certainly, if the village was a sort of prison, Mrs. Clerk was its spiritual gaoler, and Nora would have dearly loved to flourish her dawning freedom in the disapproving face of her natural enemy. But Mrs. Clerk was nowhere to be seen, and Nora's flashing glance encountered only her mother's grave, thoughtful eyes.

Against all advice, Mrs. Ingestre had determined to accompany her daughter up to London. Perhaps she feared her husband's last exhortations, perhaps she was urged by a secret heart-hunger. Yet her whole face brightened with warm sympathy as she read in Nora's smile and heightened colour the proud, bold joy of youth plunging for the first time into the full tide of life.

"You are glad to go?" she asked in a low voice that was without the faintest tone of reproach.

Nora nodded.

"I am excited," she said. "I feel like a pioneer setting out on the discovery of new worlds. And so I am. What does it matter that millions of people have been where I am going? *I* have never been before. It is all new to me."

Her father sighed in pained disapproval.

"Let us hope that your adventures in foreign lands will not cost you too dear, Nora," he said. "May they bring you back to your home contented and grateful for its blessed peace."

Mrs. Ingestre leant forward and laid her hand on Nora's. The movement might have been made in confirmation of her husband's words—it might also have had another meaning. It might have meant, taken in conjunction with the almost youthful flash in the dark eyes: "Be of good cheer! The world and life are before you. Grasp both in spite of every one. They are worth fighting for!"

And Nora's clasp responded. Her spirits were at their highest pitch. She was afraid of nothing; the long journey, the foreign country, and its despised inhabitants had no terrors for her. Youth and morning sunshine swept her forward on a wave of impetuous joy. She even found it in her heart to be thankful for the "blows of Providence," though for other reasons than those of her piously resigned parent. "After all, now I shall be able to fight my own battles," was her proud thought.

The day in London cast the first shadow over her courage. They arrived in the metropolis at midday, and as the boat-train left at eight o'clock in the evening there was a whole afternoon to be spent wandering about the busy streets—a pleasant occupation if you understand how to go about it. But this was one thing that the Rev. John did not understand. He belonged to the class of people for whom London is a great black, smutty monster, replete with all the vices and crimes of Babylon, and his passage through its heart was a veritable penance. His sincerely Puritan temperament—for, to do him justice, he was but half a hypocrite and only that much unconsciously, like the rest of us—found "sermons in stones," and in everything else from the wicked luxury of the lady lounging in her victoria to the ragged profligacy of the beggar. Sermons he delivered, therefore, and Nora, trudging wearily at his side, with all her eyes on the ignored shop windows, listened in sullen defiance. She loved London with the almost passionate love which is given to no other city in the world. She loved the fogs, its dirt, its stern, relentless bustle; she felt a sort of vague kinship with its vagabonds, its grandees, its very policemen, and her father's criticisms goaded her to distraction. Yet once, as they dragged themselves into an A.B.C. for tea, she saw her mother's face, and her anger died down, yielding to the first cold touch of home-sickness. There was something written on the pale, worn face which she could not read but which filled her with vague pain. Visited by what unshed years of regret, longing, and unavailing remorse had those quiet eyes watched the tide of life flow past them? Nora did not know. In an instinctive, almost childish, sympathy she slipped her hand into Mrs. Ingestre's.

"Dear, dear mother!" she said, "I wish I could make you happy—really happy."

The Rev. John had gone to order the buns and tea which were to form the *pièces de résistance* of their evening meal. Mrs. Ingestre looked down into the young, earnest face. Her own face relaxed an instant from its own usual serenity. It was as though a sudden gust of wind had passed over a lake, ruffling its smooth, peaceful surface.

"Be happy," she said almost imperatively. "Whatever else happens, remember that you have the right to happiness. And to be happy you must open your heart wide—you must welcome all that is good, even if it is not the good you have been taught to know. Don't let Delford or—or even

us make your standard. Keep the past and those that love you, but don't let them hem you—don't let them stand between you and the future. Show your new world a big, generous, open heart, and it will open a heart as big and generous to you. Be arrogant and petty, and everything about you will reflect yourself. Oh, Nora, I am not preaching; a narrow heart is a curse to others and to itself."

There was a peculiar emphasis in her words, a note in her voice so like despair that it rang long afterwards in Nora's memory. It cast a deeper shadow over her sinking spirits, and as she walked by her mother's side towards the station which was to mark their first long parting, the hot, burning tears welled up in her eyes and only by a strong effort were kept back from overflow. Since that morning, with its brilliant sunshine, its youth and hope, all had changed within her and without. The sunshine had yielded to cold, dark shadows, youth and hope lagged wearily, overcome by the growing tide of home-love. "Dear old England!" Nora whispered to herself. "Dear old England!" And the very shop windows, casting bright golden patches on the thickening fog, seemed to have a special light of their own. The faces of the passers-by were dear to her because they were English faces and because she was going to a strange country, where she would see them no more. Even the red-brick church and "the monument" became hallowed in her memory. In that moment of youthful grief she would have given worlds to know that she was going home, that there were to be no partings, that she was to live her life in the dull peace to which she had waved a joyous farewell that very morning.

They entered the great station. The bustle and confusion brought her no relief—rather, it increased the sense of helplessness which was growing stronger and stronger. For a moment she lost sight of her father and mother, and it was then she felt for the first time all the poignancy of the loneliness which was, in less than a quarter of an hour, to become an irreparable reality. She turned, dazedly seeking a familiar face, and in the same instant a firm, warm hand clasped hers.

"Nora—little girl!"

It was Arnold who stood beside her. She recognised his strong, gaunt face with a sudden, joyous start which brought the colour to her cheeks. Had she unconsciously been longing for him? Had the heartache been a little because she had not seen him, because ever since that decisive morning he had kept away from her, taking her dismissal as final? Was it final? These were things he at least might have asked as he felt the quick response of her touch and saw the light flash back into her tear-filled eyes. But Nora thought of nothing—asked no questions. She clung to his arm like a tired, lost child.

"Oh, I am so glad," she said, almost incoherent with relief, "so glad!"

"I couldn't keep away," he said, himself shaken by her sudden self-abandonment. "I did my best, but in the end I had to come. I could not let you go so far from me without a God-speed. And something seemed to tell me that you would be glad to see me."

"I am!" she cried. "Of course I am!"

They reached Mrs. Ingestre and her husband, who were busy with the luggage registration. A shadow seemed to pass over the latter's face as she saw the two together, but she greeted Arnold with her usual serene courtesy.

"Miles has come too," she said.

Miles was, indeed, very much *en évidence*. He had made himself what he called "smart" for the occasion, and an extraordinary high collar and a flagrantly red tie certainly put him beyond all danger of being overlooked. His face was a trifle flushed—perhaps with the hurry of his arrival—and his manner jocose.

"You look as though you might flood the station any minute," he told Nora. "I bet anything you'd give your bottom dollar to be out of it."

"Don't, Miles!" she answered gently. "Of course I am sorry to leave you all. It is only natural."

Her eyes met Arnold's, and perhaps they said more than she knew. He came back to her side.

"Let us go and find a comfortable corner for you," he suggested.

She followed him passively, and they walked along the platform to the end of the train, where the crowd of passengers was less dense.

"Dear little Nora!" he said, looking down at her with infinite pity and tenderness. The tears rushed again to her eyes. She fought them down courageously, but her voice shook as she answered:

"It is so hard to go," she said, "much harder than I thought this morning. I have only just realised how dear everything—everybody is to me."

"Nora, that is what I hoped. You are so young—you do not know your own heart. Now perhaps you can tell better—if there is any chance for me."

She saw the pleading in his face, and she made no answer. Her throat hurt her and she was no longer so sure. She did care for him, and if she had felt no thrill of passion at his touch, his presence seemed to envelop her in a warm, comforting glow of protecting tenderness infinitely precious.

"Nora," he went on, "even now it is not too late. My dearest, what are you waiting for? What are you expecting to find? I believe I could make you happy—my love is so great."

She threw up her head with the determined gesture he knew so well.

"I must go," she said. "It would be weak and cowardly to turn back at the last minute. Only ——"

"You will come back soon?"

She nodded, her lips trembling.

"I feel I must," she said.

"And you will write to me?"

The Rev. John bustled up to them. He was flustered and nervous, as people are to whom a journey of any sort is an event full of dangerous possibilities.

"You must get in at once," he said fussily. "The train is just off. There, God bless you, my dear child! Remember all I have said. And if you are not happy, or the people not nice, let us know at once."

Mrs. Ingestre clasped her daughter in a short, almost passionate embrace.

"Be happy!" she said again; and the words were a blessing.

The carriage door slammed to; somewhere from the rear they heard the guard's shrill whistle, and gradually the train began to glide forward, leaving behind the little group of dearly loved faces.

Arnold walked at the carriage side.

"You will write to me often?" he pleaded.

"Yes, yes, I will write."

"Tell me everything—everything you think and feel. Oh, Nora, it is so hard to let you go! But I have taken fresh hope. I believe you will come back soon—I believe it will all come right for us both."

The train was gathering speed. He had to run to keep pace with her carriage.

"Nora, after all—you do care a little, don't you?"

She nodded. She was so tired, so heart-sick, that had it been possible she would have sprung out and put her hand in his in weary, thankful surrender. But it was too late. She could only look at him, and again her eyes told more than she perhaps would have said. He stood still, hat in hand, and waved to her, and the last she saw of him was a face full of hope and gratitude.

"When you send for me, I shall come," he said.

The train glided into the suffocating darkness of a tunnel, and when they once more emerged the station was far behind, and they were travelling faster and faster into the night. The lights of London, of home, of England swept past in blurred lines of fire.

Nora Ingestre watched them, fighting bravely; but when they had disappeared she covered her eyes with her hand and wept the silent, bitter tears of a first exile.

## CHAPTER V
### AMONG THE HEATHEN

"Karlsburg! *Alles aussteigen*—Karlsburg!"

Nora sprang up, roughly aroused from a half-doze by the stentorian tones and a general move in her compartment. The fat German who had occupied the corner seat opposite her, and who had spent the journey in doing his best to justify her scorn and contempt for all foreigners, was heaving great masses of untidy luggage out of the window and shouting furiously for a *Gepäckträger*. In this performance he trod more than once on Nora's toes, thus arousing her so effectually that she made haste to convey herself and her belongings out into the narrow corridor congested with passengers and baggage. After a brief energetic scramble down the appalling staircase which separates the continental traveller from the platform, she landed safely and drew a sigh of relief. "Here I am at last!" she thought, comforted by the knowledge that the worst was over. The "worst" in connection with separations is the first twenty-four hours, the first night-fall, and the first awaking to changed surroundings and circumstances. After that, the human capacity

for adjustment mercifully begins to display itself, and the first poignancy of grief is over—at any rate for those who have courage and youth to help them. And Nora had both. As she stood that morning on the deck of the Flushing boat, watching the pale, low outline of land, she had already felt the first glow of returning vigour. The keen sea-air had blown colour into her cheeks; the tears which had threatened to assert themselves so often the night before had dried at their source, and she had flung herself into the confusion of exchange from the boat to the waiting train with a pleased realisation of her own independence. Then had come the long and glorious panorama along the Rhine, the frowning castles, the majestic spires of the great Dom, the new types of men and women hurrying backwards and forwards about the busy platforms.

During the long hours Nora's watchful, eager eyes never closed. This, then, was the new world to which she was to open her heart; these, then, the people whose qualities of goodness she was to learn to honour. The first task was easy enough—it was, indeed, a beautiful world. But the people? They were of another type than that to which she was accustomed, and Nora, imbued with the pleasant insular conviction that all English people are tall and handsome, found them so far little to her taste. In truth, a firmly rooted prejudice is not to be overcome in a moment, or even by the wisest precept, and not all Mrs. Ingestre's eloquence could crush back the half-conscious superiority which her daughter experienced in that stuffy second-class coupé. Her fellow-passengers, be it confessed, were stout and inelegant, and they obviously preferred the window closed—points which were alone quite sufficient to stamp them as belonging to an inferior class. But the chief point was Nora's own nationality. The mere fact that she was English would have kept her in countenance even when confronted with the whole Imperial family, and, indeed, throughout the journey, with its difficulties, its various encounters with idiotic foreign porters who refuse to understand the English language, no matter how loud it is shouted, she was sustained by a calm and inborn knowledge of her racial superiority. Thus she felt no sense of loneliness or helplessness until the voice shouting "Karlsburg" had hurried her out on to the crowded, bustling platform. There for the first time she felt her own insignificance, her own strangeness. She was really in a foreign country at last, and with all her superiority she stood there a forlorn handful of pretty, despairing girlhood, waiting for the first jabbering, gesticulating savage to rescue her from her perplexity.

"*Ach, liebes Kind, da bist du! Willkommen!*"

The eager, kindly voice and the cordial embrace were equally sudden and somewhat overwhelming. Steadying her hat from the effects of the shock, Nora turned to find herself held by a short, stout little woman, very out of breath, very excited, who was smiling and nodding at her as though at an old and very dear acquaintance.

"Ach! you do not know me?" she interrogated, adding in the same gasp, "But how should you? I am ze old Fräulein Müller—you haf heard of her? Long ago she did teach ze muzzer, and now here is ze daughter—her muzzer every bit of her. *Ach, du lieber Gott im Himmel*! But I must not so much talk. Give ze man your *Gepäckschein, liebes Kind*."

Half overcome by the torrent of words, Nora produced the document which she supposed answered to the name of Gepäckschein. In the interval, whilst Fräulein Müller was apparently pouring volumes of mingled explanation and abuse over the head of an equally flustered porter, Nora had opportunity to study her rescuer. Fräulein Müller, she imagined, was well over the fifties and, on account of her stoutness, looked her age, but her face was as lively as it was plain, and the rotund figure in its dowdy brown dress cut after the manner of a long-forgotten fashion seemed to be bubbling over with seething sprightliness. Nora had a quick eye, and her critical faculties, at home usually dormant, were on the alert. "How badly the Germans dress!" she thought. "What dreadful boots—and that dress! I suppose it is her best, and it was probably quite expensive. Whatever could have made any one choose a colour like that?"

Her observations were cut short by her unconscious victim grasping her by the arm and hurrying her up and down dark flights of steps, the whole way continuing her explanations, peppered with gasps and exclamatory German outbreaks.

"Ze portermans are ze stupidest race on ze earth," she panted, "but I haf told him—I haf his number—it is zirty-one—please try and remember, *liebes Kind*—zat he must your *Koffers* bring at once. Ze Frau Baronin's carriage is not big enoff to take more zan us two and your rugs. *Ach, je*! Ze many steps are not for one so short in ze breaths as I!"

They were out of the station at last—Nora had delivered up her ticket with the feeling that the last link between her and home was gone—and were greeted by a simply dressed footman, who conducted them to a brougham promptly summed up by Nora as shabby.

Fräulein Müller dropped back into the cushions with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Now all is well," she said. "I shall drive wiz you to the Frau Baronin's house and see you safe in. She ask me to fetch you, as I knew I could easy find you. *Ach, sie ist die Liebenswürdigkeit selber, die, Frau Baronin!*"

"You are her great friend?" Nora suggested, seeking something to say.

Fräulein Müller threw up her plump hands in the straining brown kid gloves and laughed.

"Nee, nee, *liebes Kind*, how should zat be? I am Fräulein Müller—old Fräulein Müller—and she is the Baronin von Arnim."

Perhaps Nora's look showed that the all-apparent distinction was not clear, for her companion went on with a soft chuckle:

"Zat is somezing you vill understand wiz ze time, my dear. Ze Baronin is von great person and I am von nobody. Zat is all. I am proud zat I haf brought a so nice English girl—and glad to haf been able to give ze daughter of my dear pupil so nice a place. I am sure you will be very happy."

Nora's arched brows contracted for a minute. Something in Fräulein Müller's tone or words ruffled her—she was not quite sure why. The little woman was so obviously and naïvely impressed with the glories of Nora's new position and with the greatness and splendour of the "Baronin," of whom she spoke with almost bated breath, that Nora's self-importance was somewhat wounded. Besides which, she regarded both matters as decidedly "unproven." The "Baronin," she felt sure, was a snobbish person, probably very stout and ponderous, and as for her splendour and greatness, it remained yet to be seen. Armorial bearings with a seven-pearled crown—after all, Nora knew very well that everybody was a count or a baron in Germany—and a bone-shaking brougham with a shabby footman proved nothing at all. Thus Nora expressed neither gratitude nor gratification, and her manner was perhaps more chilly than she intended, for her companion subsided into an abrupt silence, which lasted until the carriage drew up and the door was opened by the despised attendant.

"Now you are here!" she cried, springing out with surprising agility. "I vill come no further—my leetle *étage* is just round the corner. In a day or two I vill venture to pay respects on the Baronin and see how all goes wiz you. Until then—*lebewohl*!"

Much to Nora's relief, she was not embraced a second time. A warm squeeze of the hand, which seemed, somehow, to express a slight "hurtness," and the stumpy little figure disappeared into the darkness, leaving Nora to face her destiny alone.

It was now dusk, and she had only time to take in the dim outline of a small, square house before the footman led her up the steps to the already opened door. A flood of light greeted her as she entered the hall, and seemed to intensify its unfurnished coldness. Little as she had expected, the barren white walls and carpetless stone floor cast a chill over her courage which not even the beaming smile of a pleasant-faced but far from stylish parlourmaid could wholly dispel.

"*Die gnädige Frau wartet im Salon*," she said, and proceeded to conduct the way farther down the passage, switching off the electric light carefully as she went.

In spite of everything, Nora's heart beat faster with anticipation and an inevitable nervousness. The great moment had arrived which was to decide the future. "As long as she is fat and comfortable like Fräulein Müller, I daresay it won't be so bad," she told herself, but prepared for the worst. A minute later and she was ushered into a room so utterly at variance with what had gone before and her own expectations that she stood still on the threshold with a little inward gasp of surprise.

The softly shaded light revealed to her quick young eyes an elegance, if not luxury, whose details she had no time to gather. She received only an impression of warm, delicate colours, soft stuffs, rich, sound-deadening carpets and the touch of an indefinable personality, whose charm seemed to linger on every drapery. From the ugly stone wall to this had been no more than a step, but that step divided one world from another, and Nora stood hesitating seeking in the shadows the personality whose influence she felt already like a living force. She had no more than an instant to wait. Then a tall, slight figure rose out of one of the chairs drawn out of the circle of light and came to meet her.

"You are very welcome, Miss Ingestre," a voice said, and her hand was taken and she was led farther into the room. "I would have met you myself, but I had no method of recognising you, and the *gute* Fräulein Müller seemed so sure that she would be able to find her old pupil's daughter."

The voice was low, the English almost perfect, though a little slow, as though from want of practice, the touch of the hand firm and cool. Somehow, in that moment poor Nora felt painfully aware that she was dirty and untidy from the journey and, above all, that she was terribly young and awkward. Yet her natural frankness stood her in good stead. She looked up, smiling.

"Fräulein Müller picked me out at once," she said. "I must be very like my mother, otherwise I cannot think how she found me."

"In any case, the great thing is that you are found," Frau von Arnim said. "Come and sit down here. You see, we have a real English tea waiting for you."

Nora obeyed willingly, and whilst the white, delicate hands were busy with the cups standing on the low tray, she had opportunity to study the woman upon whom the weal or woe of perhaps a whole long year depended. "She is not as beautiful as my mother," Nora thought, but the criticism was no disparagement. If Frau von Arnim was not actually beautiful, she at least bore on every feature marked refinement, and the expression of the whole face, pale and slightly haughty though it was, had a certain indefinable fascination which held Nora's attention riveted. She was dressed elegantly, moreover, in some dark colour which suited the brown hair and the slow hazel eyes which, Nora felt positive, had in one quiet glance taken in every detail of her appearance.

"We are so very glad that you have come," Frau von Arnim went on. "My daughter and I love everything that is English, but, alas, nice English people are *rariæ aves* in Karlsburg. We have only the scum of all nations, and I cannot tell you how pleased we were when your mother decided to entrust you to our care."

The tone of the words was delicate and kind, suggesting a conferred favour on Nora's side which somehow had the reverse effect. In her youthful and insular arrogance Nora had felt that the "German family" which boasted of her services was to be congratulated, and that the real and only question of importance was whether she liked *them*. Now she found herself wondering what this serene and graceful woman was thinking of *her*.

"I'm afraid I'm not a bit a glory to my nation," she said, with sincere schoolgirlish humility. "I wish I was."

Frau von Arnim laughed.

"We like you very much already," she said. "Besides, you could not help being nice with such a charming mother."

Nora started with pleased surprise, and whatever had been unconsciously antagonistic in her melted into an impulsive gratitude which spoke out of the heightened colour and bright, frank eyes.

"Do you know my mother, then?" she asked.

"No, only by her letters. But letters betray far more than the writers think. I often feel when I meet some reserved, unfathomable person who interests me, that if he would only write me the shortest note I should know more of him than after hours of conversation. And Mrs. Ingestre and I have exchanged many long letters. We feel almost as though she were an old friend; don't we, Hildegarde?"

This sudden appeal to a third person revealed to Nora the fact that they were not alone. Frau von Arnim rose, smiling at her bewilderment, and took her by the hand.

"You must think us very rude, strange people," she said, "but my daughter has been listening and watching all this time. You see, it is for her sake that we wanted you to come and live with us, and she had a whim that she would like to see you without being seen. Invalids may have whims and be pardoned, may they not?"

Whilst she had been speaking she had led Nora to the far end of the room. There, lying on a sofa drawn well into the shadow, Nora now perceived a girl of about her own age, whose thin, white face was turned to greet her with a mingling of apology and that pathetic humility which goes with physical weakness.

"Do not be angry," she said, holding out a feeble hand. "I am so afraid of strangers. I felt I should like to see you first—before you saw me. I do not know why—it was just a whim, and, as mother says, when one is ill one may perhaps be forgiven."

"Of course," Nora said gently. To herself she was thinking how beautiful suffering can be. The face lifted to hers—the alabaster complexion, the great dark eyes and fine aristocratic features framed in a bright halo of disordered hair—seemed to her almost unearthly in its spiritualised loveliness. And then there was the expression, so void of all vanity, so eloquent with the appeal: "You are so strong, so beautiful in your youth and strength. Be pitiful to me!"

Governed by some secret impulse, Nora looked up and found that Frau von Arnim was watching her intently. A veil had been lifted from the proud patrician eyes, revealing depths of pain and grief which spoke to Nora much as the younger eyes had spoken, save with the greater poignancy of experience: "You are strong, and life offers you what it will always withhold from my child. Be pitiful!"

And then prejudice, reserve, her own griefs, were swept out of Nora's hot young heart on a wave of sympathy. She still held the thin hand clasped in her own. She clasped it tighter, and her answer to the unspoken appeal came swift and unpremeditated.

"I hope you will like me," she said. "I am so glad I have come."

Hildegarde Arnim's pale face flushed with pleasure.

"I *do* like you," she said. "I do hope you will be happy with us."

And then, to their mutual surprise, the two girls kissed each other.

## CHAPTER VI
### A LETTER HOME

"I never realised before now how true it is that all men are brothers," Nora Ingestre wrote home to her mother at the end of her first week in Karlsburg. "I used to believe that we English were really the only people who counted, the really only nice people, and the rest were sort of outsiders on quite another level. And now all my ideas are turned topsy-turvy. I keep on saying to myself, 'Why, she is just like an Englishwoman,' or 'How English he looks!' and then I have to admit that the simple reason why I think they look English is because they look nice, and it seems there are nice people all the world over. Of course there are differences—one notices them especially among the poorer classes—and so far, I can only judge the men from a distance; but if I met the *Gnädige Frau*, as she is called, in any drawing-room, I should think, 'Well, with one exception, she is the most charming woman I have ever met,' and never have so much as guessed that she could belong to any country but my own. Hildegarde is a dear, too. Although she has known me such a short time, she treats me almost as though I were her sister—in fact, I am a sort of *enfant gâté* in the house, everybody, from Freda, the sturdy little housemaid, upwards, doing their best to show their goodwill to the '*kleine englische Dame*.' (You see, I am picking up German fast!) Both the *Gnädige Frau* and Hildegarde know English well and seem to enjoy talking, though one half of the day is dedicated to my first German efforts, which, I am sure, have the most comical results. But no one ever laughs at you. Even Johann, the coachman, keeps quite a straight face when I call him '*du*'—a disgraceful piece of endearment which seems to haunt me every time I open my mouth. That reminds me to tell you that yesterday we went for a lovely drive in the Wild Park, the private property of the Grand Duke. Driving is the only outdoor enjoyment which is left for poor Hildegarde, and it is terribly hard on her, because she loves riding and driving and tennis, and all that sort of thing. It seems she had a bad accident whilst out riding two years ago with her cousin, who is a captain in the Artillery here, and since then she has always been ill. She never complains, and is always so sweet and patient that it makes one despise oneself for not being an angel outright, but I know that she has her struggles. Yesterday, for instance, Johann was giving the horse a breathing space in a lovely *allée*—oh, you would have enjoyed it, darling! It was just like a glorious bit of England, with great oak trees on either side and lots of deer and—there, now! I have lost myself! Where was I?—Oh, yes, in the *allée*, when an officer galloped past and saluted. I hardly saw his face, but he certainly looked very smart in his dark-blue uniform, and he sat his horse as though he were part of it. He turned out to be Herr von Arnim, the cousin in question, and I would not have thought any more about him had it not been for a glimpse I caught of Hildegarde's face. She is always pale, but just at that moment she looked almost ghastly, and her lips were tight-pressed together, as though she were in pain. Somehow, I knew it was not physical, so I did not dare say anything, but I have wondered since whether it was the memory of all the splendid gallops she used to have and will never have again, or whether—but there! I must not let my fancy run away with me. Anyhow, I am quite anxious to see the 'Herr Baron' again. Perhaps I shall to-morrow at the *Gnädige Frau's* 'At Home'—at least, I suppose it is an 'At Home' or a German equivalent—a function which fills me with the profoundest awe and alarm. Imagine me, dearest, with my knowledge of the German language, in a crowd of natives! What will happen to me, I wonder? If I am lucky, the earth will open and swallow me up before I say something dreadful by mistake.

"*September* 15.—You see, I am writing my letter in diary form, so that you get all the details—which is what you want; is it not, dearest? And, indeed, there are so many details that I do not know where to begin. At any rate, the 'At Home' is over, which is a comfort, for it was even more

exciting than I had expected. The crowd was awful—there were so many people that one could hardly breathe, and I was so frightened of some one speaking to me that I had to keep on repeating to myself, 'Remember you are English! Remember you are English!' in order to prevent a disorderly and undignified flight. Fortunately there was too much confusion for anybody to notice my insignificant person, and at last I managed to hide myself in an obscure alcove, where I could see and not be seen. On the whole it was the most mixed 'At Home' I have ever seen, and I am sure it would have shocked Mrs. Chester beyond words, You know how much she thinks of clothes and all that sort of thing. Well, here, apparently, no one thinks anything of them at all. Some of the biggest 'aristocrats'—they were nearly all 'aristocrats,' as I found out afterwards—were dressed in fashions which must have been in vogue when I was born, and nobody seemed to think it in the least funny. Of course, there were well-dressed people and a few young officers in uniform, who brightened matters up with a little colour, but I had no time to take in more than a general impression, for just as I was settling down to enjoy myself, some one spoke to me. Fortunately it was in English, or I have no doubt I should have fainted; as it was, I looked up and found a man in a pale-blue uniform standing beside me with his heels clapped together, evidently waiting for me to say something. I supposed he had introduced himself, for I had heard him say 'Bauer' in a rather grating voice, but I felt very far from friendly. You know how I am, mother. I take violent likes and dislikes, and I cannot hide either the one or the other. And almost in the same instant that I saw this man's face I disliked him. I cannot tell you why. He was good-looking enough and his manners were polished, but there was something in his face, in the way he looked at me, which made me angry—and afraid. It sounds absurd to talk of being afraid at a harmless German 'At Home,' but if I believed in omens I should say that the man is destined to bring me misfortune and that the instant I saw him I knew it. Please don't laugh—I am only trying to explain to you how intense the feeling was, and to make my subsequent behaviour seem less foolish. I fancy I was not friendly in my answers or in my looks, but he sat down beside me and went on talking. It does not matter what he said. He spoke English well, and seemed to 'listen to himself' with a good deal of satisfaction, all the time never taking his eyes off my face. Somehow, though everything he said was polite enough, I felt that he looked upon me as a kind of 'dependent' with whom he could amuse himself as he pleased; and that made my blood boil. I prayed for some one to come and fetch me away, and just then Frau von Arnim passed close to where I was sitting. I heard her ask after me and say something about music (I had promised to play), and suddenly I felt ashamed. I wondered what she would think of me if she found me sitting in a secluded corner with a man whom I had never seen before and to whom I had never been properly introduced. After all, she does not know me well enough to understand—well, that I am not that sort, and the idea that she might think badly of me with an appearance of reason was more than could bear. There is a small door in the alcove leading out into the hall, and just when my uninvited companion was in the middle of a sentence I got up and went out without a word of explanation. I am afraid it was neither a very dignified nor sensible proceeding, and it certainly landed me into worse difficulties, since the next thing I knew after my stormy exit was that I had collided violently with a man standing in the hall. Of course, my fragment of German forsook me, and I gasped, 'I beg your pardon!' in English, to which my victim answered, 'I beg *your* pardon!' also in English, but with the faintest possible accent. After that I recovered enough from the shock to draw back and assume as much dignity as I could under the circumstances. My victim was a tall, broad-shouldered man—of course in uniform-and though it was already twilight in the hall I could see that he had a pleasant, sun-burnt face and bright eyes, which at that moment looked very much amused. I suppose my attempt at dignity *was* rather a failure. 'I hope I did not hurt you?' he asked, and when I had reassured him on that point he suggested that he should introduce himself, as there was no one there to do it for him. Whereupon he clicked his spurs together and said, 'Von Arnim. Miss Ingestre, I think?' I asked him how he knew my name, and he said, as a Prussian officer it was his duty to know everything, and that he had heard so much about Miss Ingestre that it was impossible not to recognise her. And then we stood looking at each other, I feeling horribly awkward, he evidently still very much amused. Then he proposed to take me back into the drawing-room, but that was the last thing I wanted, and I said so in my usual rude way, which seemed to amuse him still more.

"'But why not?' he asked. (I give you the conversation in full.)

"'Because they wanted me to play.' (It was the first excuse I could think of.)

"'Is that kind? You are depriving my aunt's guests of a great treat.'

"'How do you know?'

"'Military instinct.'

I could not help laughing at him.

"'Your military instinct is all wrong,' I said. 'At any rate, I don't want to go back.'

"I don't know why, but I fancy he suspected there was something more in the matter than I had explained. At any rate, he grew suddenly quite grave.

"'You see, I have taken you prisoner of war,' he said, 'and it is my duty to keep you in sight. At the same time, I wish to make your captivity as agreeable as possible. Suppose I persuade my aunt not to worry you to play, and suppose I see that no one else worries you—will you come back?'

"I said 'Yes' in a lamb-like fashion altogether new to me, and after he had hung up his sword he opened the door and bowed me in. I saw my first partner staring at us, but I felt curiously at my ease, not any more strange and helpless. And Herr von Arnim was so nice. After he had paid his respects all round he came back and brought me some tea and talked to me about the opera, to which we are going to-morrow evening. I forgot to tell you about it, didn't I? It is the Walküre, and I am bubbling over with excitement, as Frau von Arnim has given me her seat at the opera so that I can always go with Hildegarde. She is good to me. Sometimes I think she must be very rich, and then there are things which make me doubtful—the old pill-box brougham, for instance. But perhaps that is just German style—or lack of it. I must stop now, or I shan't have stamps enough to post this letter. Indeed, I do not know why I have given you all these details. They are very unimportant—but somehow they seemed important when I was writing. Good-night, dearest!

"*September* 16.—It is nearly twelve o'clock, and the *Gnädige Frau* told me I should hurry straight to bed and make up for the lost beauty-sleep, but I simply can't! I feel I must sit down and tell you all about it whilst I am still bubbling over with it all and the *Feuerzauber* and the *Liebesmotif* and all the other glories are making symphonies of my poor brains. Oh, mother darling! how you would have enjoyed it! That is always my first thought when I hear or see something beautiful, and to-night—to-night I feel as though I had been let into a new world. Do you remember that glorious evening when you took me to hear *Traviata* in Covent Garden? Of course I loved it—but this was so absolutely different. It was like drinking some noble wine after sugared buns and milk. The music didn't try to please you—it just swept you away with it on great wings of sound till you stood above all Creation and looked into the deepest secrets of life. Your own heart opened and grew, everything mean and petty was left far, far beneath. I felt suddenly that I understood things I had never even thought of before—myself and the whole world. Of course, that is over now. I am just like a wingless angel stumbling over the old earthly obstacles, but I shall never forget the hours when I was allowed to fly above them all. Oh dear, does this sound very silly? It is so hard to explain. I feel as though this evening had wrought some great change in me, as though I had grown wiser, or at any rate older. Perhaps it is only a feeling which will pass, and I shall awake to-morrow to find myself the old Nora. Surely one evening cannot bring a lasting change!

"I must not forget to tell you that I met Herr von Arnim again. He came up to speak to Hildegarde after the first act, and I was glad to find that my first impression of him was correct. If I had gone by my old prejudices and by Lieutenant Bauer I should have always believed that German officers were frightful boors, but Herr von Arnim seems just like an English gentleman, a little stiff and ceremonious at first, perhaps, but not in the least conceited or self-conscious. Of course he talks English excellently—he told me he was working it up for some examination or other, so perhaps he thought I was a good subject to practise on. At any rate, he was very attentive, and stayed with us until long after the bell had rung, so that he had to hurry to get back to his place in time. There were quite a number of officers present, and some of the uniforms are very smart, but I like the Artillery best—dark blue with a black velvet collar. It looks elegant and business-like at the same time. Certainly it suits Herr von Arnim. He is not exactly a handsome man, but well-built, with a strong, sunburnt face, a small fair moustache and very straight-looking eyes with those little lines at the corners which you always say indicate a well-developed sense of humour. Altogether, good looks and nice manners seem to run in the Arnim family. He brought us some chocolates in the second pause, and was very amusing. Hildegarde seems fond of him and he of her in a cousinly sort of way. He is so kind and attentive to her—almost as though it were his fault that she is a cripple. I wonder—oh dear! I have just heard the clock outside strike one, and I am so sleepy I do not know how I shall ever get into bed. I meant only to tell you about the music, and instead I have been wandering on about Wolff von Arnim! Good-night, my darling. Though I am so happy I am always thinking of you and wishing you were here to make me enjoy it all double. Sometimes I am very 'mother-sick,' but I fight against it because I know you want me to be happy, and it seems ungrateful to lament. Love to father and

Miles and ever so much to you, dearest.

"Your devoted daughter,
"NORA.

"P.S.—I have written a little note to Robert telling him about my arrival. He asked me to, and I couldn't refuse, could I? He seems so genuinely fond of me, and I—oh dear! I only wish I knew!

"P.SS.—They are giving the second evening of the *Ring* next Sunday. Herr von Arnim says that a great many people think it even grander than the Walküre and the *Götterdämmerung* (Sunday fortnight) grandest of all. Hildegarde is going to both, if she is strong enough, and he says I *must* come too. I told him that I knew father would strongly disapprove, and he said quite solemnly, and with a funny little German accent, that he thought an 'English Sunday the invention of the deevil,' which made me laugh. I wonder if it would be wrong to go? I know what father would say, but somehow, when I come to think over it, I *can't* feel horrified at the idea. I can't believe that it is wrong to listen to such grand, beautiful music—even on Sunday; as Herr von Arnim said, 'I am sure *der liebe Gott* would rather see you good and happy enjoying the wonders He has made than bored and bad-tempered, wishing that Sunday was well over.' What do you think, mother? Let me know soon. I will not do anything you do not like.

"P.SSS.—I think we had better keep to our first arrangement that my letters should be quite private. You see, I tell you everything, and father might not always understand.

"P.SSSS.—What a lot of postscripts! I am sure I must be very feminine, after all. I quite forgot to tell you that Fräulein Müller called the other day. She was very nervous and flustered, and treats the 'Frau Baronin' as though she were a sort of deity to be propitiated at all costs. She also asked me to tea. I went, but I won't go again if I can help it. I was never so near suffocating in my life. All the windows were double and had not been opened, I should imagine, since August, so that the August air was unpleasantly intermingled with the fumes of a furiously energetic stove, against which I had the honour of sitting for four mortal hours. But she was so friendly and kind that it seems horrid to complain, only—Heaven preserve me from being poor and living in a German flat!"

Mrs. Ingestre read the letter carefully. She then tore it up and answered the same day:

"As regards your question—do what your conscience tells you, Nora. You are old enough to judge, and I have perfect confidence in you. Be true and good, and I too think that God will not blame you if you rule your life according to the opinions He has given you rather than the arbitrary laws which we have made. Do what seems honestly right to you and you cannot do wrong—at least, not in His sight."

This letter was shown to the Rev. John, her husband, but of the scene that followed, where righteous indignation and quiet resolve fought out a bitter struggle, Nora heard nothing. She only knew that the letter had been safely posted, and that once again her mother had forced open the doors of liberty.

## CHAPTER VII
### A DUET

"Meine Herrn, to the Moltke of the future, the pride of the regiment, *er lebe—hoch—hoch—hoch*!"

The little group of officers gathered round the mess-table responded to the toast with an enthusiasm that was half bantering, half sincere. There followed a general clinking of glasses, the pleasant popping of champagne corks, and a chorus of more or less intelligible congratulations, against which the recipient stood his ground with laughing good-nature, his hands spread out before his face as though to hide natural blushes of embarrassment.

"Spare me, children!" he explained as the tumult gradually subsided. "Do you not know that great men are always modest? Your adulation throws me into the deepest possible confusion, from which I can only sufficiently extricate myself to promise you——"

"Another bottle!" a forward young ensign suggested.

"Not at all," with a wave of the hand, "nothing so basely material—but my fatherly patronage

when I am head of the Staff, as of course I shall be within a few years. Work hard, my sons, and who knows? One of you may actually become my adjutant!"

Amidst derisive laughter he drained his glass, and then turned quickly, his attention having been arrested by a slight touch upon the shoulder. Unobserved in the general confusion, a tall, slightly built man, wearing the uniform of an officer in the Red Dragoons, had entered the mess-room and, leaning on his sword-hilt in an attitude of weary impatience, had taken up his place behind the last speaker. He now held out his hand.

"Congratulate you, Arnim," he said. "I heard the racket outside as I was passing, and came in for enlightenment as to the cause. Seleneck has just told me. Permit me to drink your health." He had taken the glass which a neighbour had proffered him and raised it slightly. "May you continue as you have begun!" he added.

"Many thanks," was the brief answer.

There was a moment's silence. The new-comer sipped at his share of the German champagne and then put down the glass with a faint contracting of the features which suggested a smothered grimace.

"You must let me order up a bottle of Cliquot," he said. "A great occasion should be worthily celebrated."

Arnim shook his head.

"Again—many thanks. I have had enough, and it is of no use cultivating expensive tastes. But you perhaps...?"

"If you have no objection." The dragoon beckoned an orderly, and, having given his instructions, seated himself at the table and drew out a cigarette-case.

"This means Berlin for you," he said. "When do your orders date from?"

"From next summer. I shall still have some months with the regiment."

"So? That's tiresome. The sooner one gets away from this God-forsaken hole the better. By the way, there will be quite a little party of us with you. Seleneck tells me he is expecting a *Kommando* at the Turnschule, and I am moving heaven and earth to get ditto. You, lucky dog, are freed for ever from this treadmill existence."

The young Artillery captain glanced sharply at the speaker's good-looking face, and a close observer would have noticed that his brows had contracted.

"The way out is open to every one," he observed curtly.

The other laughed and chose to misunderstand him.

"Only to the workers, my dear fellow. And I confess that work has no fascination for me. I am not ambitious enough, and on the whole I suppose one form of drudgery is as bad as another. You like that sort of thing, and I envy you, but I fear I have no powers of emulation."

There was something grim in Arnim's subsequent silence which might have drawn the dragoon's attention had it been allowed to last. At that moment, however, an elderly-looking officer detached himself from the group by the window and came to where the two men were seated.

"I'm off home," he said. "Are you coming my way, Arnim?"

Arnim rose with an alacrity which suggested relief.

"Yes, as far as the Kaiser Strasse. You will excuse me, Bauer? I must tell the good news at home, or I shall never be forgiven."

The dragoon bowed.

"Of course. By the way," he added, as Arnim slipped into the overcoat which the orderly had brought him, "that is a pretty little English girl your aunt has picked up. I met her the last time I was at the house. What's her name?"

"You are probably referring to Miss Ingestre."

"Ingestre? Well, she's a pretty little piece of goods, anyhow—though not particularly friendly." He threw back his head and laughed, as though at some amusing reminiscence. "Imagine: I had just settled myself down to a comfortable *tête-à-tête*, when she got up and bolted—straight out of the room like a young fury. I was rather taken aback until I consoled myself with the reflection that all English people are mad—even the pretty ones."

During his recital a sudden light of comprehension flashed over Arnim's face. He half smiled, but the smile was indefinably sarcastic.

"No doubt Miss Ingestre had her good reasons for interrupting your comfortable *tête-à-tête*," he observed. "Though English people may suffer from madness, there is usually method in it."

"No doubt she had her good reasons for her return five minutes later," was the retort. "There was method in that madness, at any rate."

The two men looked each other straight in the eyes. Arnim's hand rested on his sword-hilt, and the smile had died away from his lips.

"Perhaps I ought to remind you that Miss Ingestre is my aunt's guest, and therefore under my protection," he said slowly.

"The reminder is quite unnecessary," the dragoon returned with perfect sang-froid. "I meant no offence either to you or Miss Ingestre; and poaching is, anyhow, not one of my vices."

Arnim hesitated an instant, then, with a curt bow, he slipped his arm through that of the officer standing beside him.

"Come, Seleneck," he said, "I have wasted time enough."

The two men made their way out of the Casino into the street. A sharp east wind greeted them, and Wolff von Arnim drew a deep breath of relief.

"I need fresh air," he said. "A man like Bauer stifles me, sickens me. I cannot imagine why he always seeks my society. He must know that I have no liking for him. Does he wish to pick a quarrel?"

The elder man shook his head.

"You are a harsh judge, Wolff," he said. "As far as I know, Bauer is a harmless fellow enough. It is true that he swaggers a good deal with his money and is rather pushing in circles where he is not wanted, but for the rest—I have heard nothing to his discredit."

"That may be," was the quick answer. "There are dishonourable men who act honourably out of caution, and honourable men who act dishonourably out of rashness. I do not want to be unjust, but I cannot help putting Bauer in the former category. My instinct warns me against him—and not only my instinct. A man who talks about duty as a drudgery and is content to get through life without success and with as little effort as possible is a useless drone. In our calling he is worse than that—a parasite."

Seleneck sighed.

"Oh, you ambitious, successful fellows!" he said with a lugubrious tug at his moustache. "You talk as scornfully of 'getting through life without success' as though it were a crime. Look at me—grey hairs already, a family man, and still nothing more than a blundering old captain, who will be thankful it he is allowed at the end to retire with a major's pension. *I* am one of your drones—a parasite, if you like, and certainly a failure, but Heaven knows it is not my wish."

"You are no more a failure than the best of us," Wolff von Arnim answered vigorously. "I know you, *alter Kerl*, and I know you have given your best strength, your best thought to your calling; I know 'duty' is the Alpha and Omega of your life—no one could ask more of you."

"I have done my best," was the simple answer. "It hasn't come to much, but still, it was my best. You, Wolff, will go much farther."

They were passing under the light of a street lamp as he spoke, and Arnim glanced at his companion's face. There was perhaps something written on the plain yet honest and soldierly features which touched him, for his own relaxed, and the softened expression made him seem almost boyish.

"If I do my duty as well as you have done, I shall be very proud," he said earnestly.

They walked on in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts, and then Seleneck came to a standstill.

"Our ways end here," he said. "I suppose you are going to Frau von Arnim's?"

"Yes; I must let her know my good luck. She will be very glad."

"And the little cousin—will she be 'very glad'?"

Arnim met the quizzical not unkindly glance with an almost imperceptible change of countenance.

"I suppose so. Why shouldn't she?"

"She will miss you."

Arnim did not answer, nor did he show any sign of continuing on his way. He seemed suddenly caught in a painful train of thought, from which his companion made no effort to arouse him.

"Poor little soul!" he said at last, half to himself. "It is terribly hard luck on her. No one loved life as she did, and now"—his brows contracted—"sometimes I feel as though I were to blame," he added abruptly.

"What nonsense!" Seleneck retorted. "Are you responsible because a horse shies and a girl has the misfortune to be thrown?"

"Perhaps not; but the feeling of responsibility is not so easily shaken off. I never see her—or her mother—without cursing the impulse that made me take her out that day."

"It might just as well have happened any other day and with any one else," Seleneck retorted cold-bloodedly.

"Of course. Only one cannot reason like that with one's conscience. At any rate, there is nothing I would not do to make her happy—to atone to her. Besides," he added hastily, as though he had said something he regretted, "I am very fond of her."

The elder man tapped him on the shoulder.

"*Alter Junge*," he said pointedly, "I can trust your career to your brains, but I am not so sure that I can trust your life to your heart. Take care that you do not end up as Field-Marshal with Disappointment as your adjutant. *Lebewohl*."

With an abrupt salute he turned and strode off into the gathering twilight, leaving Arnim to put what interpretation he chose to the warning. That the warning had not been without effect was clear. Arnim went up the steps of the square-built house with a slowness that suggested reluctance, and the features beneath the dark-blue cap, hitherto alight with energy and enthusiasm, had suddenly become graver and older.

He found Frau von Arnim in her private sitting-room, writing letters. She turned with a pleased smile as he entered, and held out a hand which he kissed affectionately. The bond between them was indeed an unusually close one, and dated from Wolff's first boyhood, when as a pathetically small cadet he had wept long-controlled and bitter tears on her kind shoulder and confided to her all the wrongs with which his elder comrades darkened his life. From that time he had been a constant Sunday guest at her table, had been Hildegarde's playfellow throughout the long Sunday afternoons, and had returned to the grim Cadettenhaus at nightfall laden with contraband of the sort dearest to a boy's heart. Afterwards, as ensign and young lieutenant, he had still looked up to her with the old confidence, and to this very hour there had been no passage in his life, wise or foolish, of which she was not cognisant. She had been mother, father, and comrade to him, and it was more by instinct than from any sense of duty that he had come to her first with his good news.

"I have been appointed to the Staff in Berlin," he said. "The order arrived this afternoon. It's all a step in the right direction, isn't it? At any rate, I shall be out of the routine and able to do head-work to my heart's—I mean head's content."

Frau von Arnim laughed and pressed the strong hand which still held hers.

"It is splendid, Wolff," she said. "I knew that the day would come when we should be proud of *unsren Junge*. Who knows? Perhaps as an old, old woman I shall be able to hobble along on a stately General's arm—that is, of course, if he will be seen with such an old wreck. But"—her face overshadowed somewhat—"when shall we have to part with you?"

"Not for some months," he said, seating himself beside her, "and then I think you had better pack up your goods and chattels and come too. I shall never be able to exist without you to keep me in order and Hildegarde to cheer me up."

"I have never noticed that you wanted much keeping in order," Frau von Arnim said with a grave smile. "And as for the other matter, it is to you that Hildegarde owes much of her cheeriness. She will miss you terribly."

A silence fell between them which neither noticed, though it lasted some minutes. Overhead some one began to play the "Liebeslied" from the *Walküre*.

Wolff looked up and found that his aunt's eyes were fixed on him.

"Hildegarde?" he asked, and for the first time he felt conscious of a lack of candour.

Frau von Arnim shook her head.

"Poor Hildegarde never plays," she reminded him gently. "It is Nora—Miss Ingestre. You remember her?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "She is not easily forgotten." After a moment's hesitation he added, "I never knew English people could be so charming. Those I have met on my travels have either been badly mannered boors or arrogant pokers. Miss Ingestre is either an exception or a revelation."

The room was in part darkness, as Frau von Arnim loved it best. A small lamp burned on her table, and by its light she could study his face unobserved.

"She has won all hearts—even to the coachman, who has a prejudice against foreigners," she said in a lighter tone, "and Hildegarde has become another person since her arrival. I do not know what we should do without her. When she first came she was, of course, baked in her insular prejudices, but she is so open-minded and broad-hearted that they have fallen away almost miraculously. We have not had to suffer—as is so often the case—from volleys of Anglo-Saxon criticisms."

"She seems musical, too," Wolff said, who was still listening with close attention to the unseen player.

"She is musical; so much so that I am having her properly trained at the Conservatorium," his aunt answered with enthusiasm. "When she has got out of certain English mannerisms she will do well. It is already a delight to listen to her."

A tide of warm colour darkened Wolff's face as he glanced quickly at Frau von Arnim's profile.

"I wonder what little pleasure—or perhaps necessity—you have denied yourself to perform that act of kindness?" he said.

"Neither the one nor the other, *lieber Junge*. If I deny myself one pleasure to give myself another, it can hardly be counted as a denial, can it? Besides, I believe her people are very badly off, and it is a shame that her talent should suffer for it. There! I am sure you want to go upstairs. Run along, and let me write my letters."

Wolff laughed at the old command, which dated back to the time when he had worried her with his boy's escapades.

"I'll just glance in and tell Hildegarde my good luck," he said, a little awkwardly. "I promised her I would let her know as soon as the news came."

"Do, dear Wolff."

She turned back to her letters, and Arnim, taking advantage of her permission, hurried out of the room and upstairs.

Hildegarde's little boudoir was an inner room, divided off from the neighbouring apartment by a heavy Liberty curtain. Governed by he knew not what instinct or desire, he stepped softly across and, drawing the hangings a little on one side, remained a quiet, unobserved spectator of the peaceful scene.

Nora had left the *Walküre* and had plunged into the first act of *Tristan und Isolde*. She played it with inexperience and after her own ideas, which were perhaps not the most correct, but the face alone, with its youth, its eagerness, its enthusiasm, must have disarmed the most captious critic. And Wolff von Arnim was by no means captious at that moment. Though he was listening, he hardly realised what she was playing, too absorbed in the pure pleasure which the whole picture gave him to think of details. He knew, for instance, that her dress was simple and pretty, but he could not tell afterwards whether it was blue or green or pink, or of no colour at all; he knew that he had never before found so much charm in a woman's face, but he would have been hard put to to describe exactly wherein that charm lay, or whether her features were regular or otherwise. He simply received an impression—one that he found difficult to forget.

A lamp had been placed on the top of the piano, and by its light the bright, wide-open eyes and eager fingers were finding their way through the difficult score. The rest of the room had been left in shadow. Arnim knew where his cousin was lying, but he did not look in her direction—perhaps he did not even think of her, so far did she lie outside the picture on which his whole interest was centred; and when the music died into silence, her voice startled him by its very unexpectedness.

"Wolff, won't you come in now?" she said.

Was there pain or annoyance in her tone? Arnim could not be certain. The knowledge that she had seen him standing there was sufficiently disconcerting. When we are unobserved, we unconsciously drop the masks which the instinct of self-preservation forces us to assume in the presence even of our dearest, and our faces betray emotions or thoughts which we have, perhaps, not even acknowledged to ourselves. As he advanced into the room, Arnim wondered uncomfortably how much the invalid's quick eyes had seen and if there was, indeed, anything in his looks or action which could have wounded her.

"You must think my manners very bad," he said in English as he greeted Nora, "but I knew if I came in you would stop playing, and that would have disappointed me and annoyed Hildegarde. You see, I know my cousin's little foibles, and one is that she does not like being interrupted in anything. Is that not so, Hildegarde?"

"You are a privileged person," she answered with a gentle smile on her pale face. "Still, I am glad you let Nora—Miss Ingestre—finish. She plays well, don't you think?"

"Splendidly—considering," was the answer.

Nora looked up.

"Considering? That sounds a doubtful compliment."

"I mean, English people as a rule have not much understanding for dramatic music."

"Yes, they have!" Nora blazed out impulsively.

"Have they?"

Still seething with injured patriotism, she met the laughter in his eyes with defiance. Then her sense of humour got the better of her.

"No, they haven't," she admitted frankly.

"There, now you are honest! Have you tried *Tristan* for the first time?"

Nora nodded. She had gone back to the piano and was turning over the leaves of the score with nervous fingers. For some reason which she never attempted to fathom, Wolff von Arnim's entries into her life, seldom and fleeting as they had been hitherto, had always brought with them a subtle, indescribable change in herself and in her surroundings. There were times when she was almost afraid of him and welcomed his departure. Then, again, when he was gone she was sorry that she had been so foolish, and looked forward to their next meeting.

"I have tried to read the first act before," she said, "but it is so hard. I can make so little out of it. I am sure it all sounds poor and confused compared to the real thing."

"Your piano score is inadequate," he said, coming to her side. "The duet arrangement is much better. Hildegarde and I used to play it together for hours."

Nora looked at him with wide-open eyes of wonder.

"Can you play?" she asked, very much as though he had boasted of his flying abilities, so that he laughed with boyish amusement.

"I play like a great many of us do," he said, "sufficiently well to amuse myself. I have a piano in my quarters which I ill-treat at regular intervals. Do you remember how angry you used to get because I thumped so?"

He had turned to the girl lying on the sofa, but she avoided his frank gaze.

"Yes," she said. "It is not so long ago, Wolff." And then, almost as though she were afraid of having betrayed some deeper feeling, she added quickly, "Couldn't you two try over the old duets together? I should so like to hear them, and I am too tired to talk."

"Would you like to, Miss Ingestre?"

"Very much—only you will find me dreadfully slow and stupid."

He hunted amongst an old bundle of music, and having found the required piece, he arranged it on the piano and prepared himself for the task with great gravity.

"You must let me have the bass," he said; "then I can thump without being so much noticed. I have a decided military touch. Hildegarde says I treat the notes as though they were recruits."

Nora played her part without nervousness, at first because she was convinced of her own superiority and afterwards because he inspired her. His guidance was sure and firm, and when he corrected, it was not as a master but as a comrade seeking to give advice as to a common task. Her shyness and uneasiness with him passed away. Every bar seemed to make him less of a stranger, and once in a long rest she found herself watching the powerful, carefully kept hands on the keyboard with a curious pleasure, as though they typified the man himself—strong, clean, and honest.

Thus they played through the whole of the first act, and when the last chord had been struck there was a long silence. It was as though both were listening to the echo of all that had gone before, and it was with an effort that Nora roused herself to speak.

"How well you play!" she said under her breath. "And how grand—how wonderful it is!"

He turned and looked at her.

"Did you understand it?"

"Not all. I feel that there are many more wonders to fathom which are yet too deep for me. But I understand enough to know that they are there—and to be glad."

"It is the noblest—most perfect expression of love and of the human heart that was ever written or composed," he said.

She looked up at him, and their eyes met gravely and steadily for a moment, in which the world was forgotten.

"Thank you very much," a quiet voice said from the background.

Arnim turned quickly, so quickly that it was almost a start.

"Now for your criticism, Hildegarde!" he cried gaily. "I assure you, we are both trembling."

Hildegarde shook her head.

"I cannot criticise," she said. "You played so well together, much better than when I was able to take my part." She hesitated. "One could hardly believe that you had never practised together before," she added slowly.

Nora rose and closed the piano. Without knowing why, the words pained her and the brief silence that followed seemed oppressive.

Arnim followed her example.

"I have been here a disgraceful time!" he exclaimed, looking at his watch. "And there! I have never even told you what I really came about. I have been passed into the General Staff. What do you think of that? Are you not proud to have such a cousin?"

His tone was gay, half teasing, but there was no response from the quiet figure on the sofa. Nora's eyes, rendered suddenly sharp, saw that the pale lips were compressed as though in pain.

"Of course, Wolff, I am so glad. It is splendid for you. How long will you be there—in Berlin, I mean?"

"A long time, I expect, unless there is a war."

Then, as though by some intuition he knew what was passing in her mind, he came to her side and took her hand affectionately between his own.

"You and the mother will have to come too," he said. "I have just been telling her that I cannot get on without you. Imagine my lonely state! It's bad enough here, now that I have no one to ride out with me. Old Bruno is eating off his head in anticipation of the day when you will gallop him through the woods again."

Hildegarde shook her head, but his words, spoken hastily and almost at random, had brought the soft colour to her cheeks.

"I shall never ride again," she said.

She looked at her cousin and then to Nora, and her own wistful face became suddenly overshadowed.

"But then," she went on with a quick, almost inaudible sigh, "that is no reason why Bruno should eat his head off, as you say. It is true I cannot ride him any more, but Miss Ingestre can, and it would do her good. Wouldn't it, Nora?"

Was there an appeal in her voice which both heard and understood? Arnim said nothing. He did not take his eyes from his cousin's face.

"It is really very good of you," Nora said quickly, "but I think I had better not. You see, I love it so, and it is best not to encourage impossible tastes. Besides, I have no habit."

Warned, perhaps, by her own involuntary start of pleasure, by Arnim's silence and Hildegarde's voice, she had sought wildly for any reasonable excuse, and unwittingly chosen the one most likely to arouse the generous impulses in both her companions.

"Whilst you are here you must enjoy everything you can get," Arnim said, smiling at her. "And who knows what Fate has in store for you?"

"And the habit is no difficulty," Hildegarde chimed in. "You can have mine. We are about the same size, and it could easily be made to fit you. Do, dear!"

She was now all enthusiasm for her own plan, and Nora, glancing at Arnim's face, saw that it had become eager with pleasure.

"Do!" he begged. "I should so like to show you all the woods about here. Or—can you not trust yourself to me?"

A second time their eyes met.

"Of course I should trust you," Nora said quickly, "and there is nothing I should love more."

"Then that is settled. You must let me know the first day which suits you. Good-bye, *gnädiges Fräulein*. Good-bye, Hildegarde. I am sending my orderly round with some books I have found. I think you will like them."

"Thank you, Wolff."

Then he was gone. They heard the door bang downstairs, and the cheery clatter of his sword upon the stone steps.

Nora came to the sofa and knelt down.

"How good you are to me!" she said. "You are always thinking of my pleasure, of things which you know I like, and, after all, it ought to be just the other way round."

"I am very fond of you," Hildegarde answered in a low voice. "Though I know you so short a time, you are the only friend I really care for. It made me bitter to see other girls enjoy their life—but you are different. I don't think I should grudge you—anything."

Her voice broke suddenly. She turned her face to the wall, and there was a long silence. Nora still knelt by the sofa. Her eyes were fixed thoughtfully in front of her, and there was an expression on her young face of wonder, almost of fear. Something new had come into her life. There was a change in herself of which she was vaguely conscious. What was it? What had brought it? Was it possible that in a mere glance something had passed out of her, something been received? She sprang restlessly to her feet, and as she did so a smothered, shaken sob broke upon the stillness. In an instant she had forgotten herself and her own troubled thoughts.

She bent over the quivering figure and tried to draw away the hands that hid the tear-stained face.

"Hildegarde—you are crying? What is it? What have I done?"

"Nothing—nothing. It is only—I am so silly and weak—and the music——" She broke off and looked up into Nora's face with a pathetic, twisted smile. And then, seeming to yield to a passionate impulse, she flung her thin arms about her companion's neck. "Oh, Nora, you are so pretty and good! Every one *must* love you—and I love you so!"

The words were an appeal, a confession, a cry breaking from an over-burdened heart. Nora drew the fair head against her shoulder, pitying and comforting a grief which she as yet but partly understood.

## CHAPTER VIII
### THE AWAKENING

Frau von Arnim sat at the round breakfast-table before a pile of open letters, which she took in turn, considered, and laid aside. Her expression was grave, and in the full morning light which poured in through the window opposite she looked older, wearier than even those who knew her best would have thought possible. The world of Karlsburg was accustomed to regard the Oberhofmarshall's widow as a woman of whom it would be safe to prophesy, "Age shall not wither her," for, as far as her envious contemporaries could see, the years had drifted past and brought no change to the serene, proud face. Perhaps they would have admitted, on reflection, that their memories could not reach back to the time when Frau von Arnim had been a girl—that, as far as they knew, she had always been the same, always serene and proud, never youthful in the true sense of the word. And therein lay the paradoxical explanation for what was called her "eternal youth." Magda von Arnim had never been really young. The storms had broken too early on her life and had frozen the overflowing spirits of her girlhood into strength of reserve, patience, and dignity. But she had not allowed them to embitter the sources of her humanity, and thus she retained in her later years what is best in youth—generosity, sympathy, a warm and understanding heart.

Frau von Arnim put aside her last letter, and with her fine white hand shading her eyes remained in an attitude of deep thought, until the door of the breakfast-room opened.

"Hildegarde!" she exclaimed, and then, quickly, painfully, "Why, how stupid of me! It is Nora, of course. Good morning, dear child. I must have been indulging in what you call a day-dream, for when you came in I thought it was really poor little Hildegarde grown well and strong again." She held Nora at arm's length. "I do not think the resemblance will ever cease to startle me. The riding-habit makes you look so alike—though really you are quite, quite different."

She tried to laugh, but the hurried tone, the sudden colour that had rushed to the usually pale cheeks betrayed to Nora the painful impression she had caused. They hurried her to a decision that had already presented itself to her before as something inevitable, something she must do if she were to be just and loyal. Time after time she had shrunk back as before some hard sacrifice, and now she felt she could shrink back no longer.

"*Gnädige Frau*, I wanted to tell you—if you don't mind, I will give up the riding. After to-day I don't think I will go again. I think it better not."

"But—why?"

It was now Nora's turn to crimson with embarrassment. She was herself hardly clear as to her reasons. The night before she had played the second act of *Tristan und Isolde* with Wolff von Arnim, and when it was at an end they had found Hildegarde lying in a sleep from which they could not at first awaken her, so close was it allied to another and graver state. And Wolff von Arnim had had a strange misery in his eyes. Such was the only explanation she knew of. She knew, too, that she could not give it. Nevertheless, she held her ground desperately.

"Because I believe it hurts you, and if not you, at least Hildegarde," she said at last. "She cries sometimes when she thinks I shall not find out, and though she never owns to it, I know it is because I enjoy things she used to have and cannot have. And, besides, it isn't fair, it isn't right. You have both been so good to me. You have treated me just as though I were a daughter of the house, and I have done nothing to deserve it. I have only caused Hildegarde pain, and that is what I do not want to do."

Frau von Arnim took her by the hand and drew her closer. A faint, rather whimsical smile

played about the fine mouth.

"Dear Nora, the fact that you are the daughter of the house proves that you deserve the best we can give you. Neither Hildegarde nor I are given to adopting relations promiscuously. And as for the other matter, anybody suffering as Hildegarde does is bound to have her moments of bitterness and regret—perhaps envy. Thank God they are not many. In the first months I have known the sight of a child playing in the street bring the tears to her eyes, and it is only natural that you, with your health and strength, should remind her of what she has lost. And there is another thing"—her manner became grave, almost emphatic—"a useless sacrifice is no sacrifice at all; it is simply flying in the face of a Providence who has given to one happiness, another sorrow. It will not make Hildegarde happy if you stay at home—on the contrary, she will blame herself—and you will deprive my nephew of a pleasure. There! After that little lecture you must have your breakfast and read your letters. You have only half an hour before you start, and my nephew suffers from military punctuality in its most aggravated form."

Nora obediently made a pretence of partaking of the frugal rolls and coffee. As a matter of fact, the prospect before her, but above all the two letters lying on her plate, had successfully driven away her appetite. The one envelope was addressed in her father's spider-like hand, the other writing set her heart beating with uneasiness. At the first opportunity she opened her father's bulky envelope and hurried over its contents. Sandwiched in between rhetorical outbursts of solemn advice, she extracted the facts that her mother was unusually out of health, that he was consequently distracted with worry and over-burdened with work, that Miles had obtained sick-leave and was enjoying a long rest in the bosom of the family, that the neighbours, Mrs. Clerk in particular, were both surprised and shocked at her, Nora's, continued absence. "Home is not home without you," the Rev. John had written pathetically. Then at the end of the letter had come the sting. There was a certain paragraph which Nora read twice over with heightened colour and a pained line between the brows.

"Dear child, you tell me that you are going out riding with a certain Herr von Arnim, your protectress's nephew. Apart from the fact that an indulgence in pleasure which your family can no longer afford seems to me in itself unfitting, I feel that there is more besides in the matter to cause me grave anxiety on your behalf. Herr von Arnim's name occurs constantly in your letters; he appears to use his musical talent as an excuse to pay you constant attention; you meet him at the theatre—which place, I must say in passing, you attend with what I fear must be a wholly demoralising frequency; he lends you books, he instructs you in the German language. Now, my dear child, I myself have never met a German officer, but from various accounts I understand that they are men of a disorderly mode of life who would not hesitate to compromise a young, inexperienced girl. Knowing, of course, that your affections do not come into question as regards a foreigner, I warn you not to allow yourself to become this man's plaything. As his aunt's dependent, he may no doubt think that you are fit game for his amusement. Remember that you are an English girl, and show him that as such you are too proud to play a degrading rôle, and that you will have none of his attentions. Ah, Nora, I would that I were with you to watch over you! Oh that you were in a certain good man's keeping!"

Nora dropped the letter. Her cheeks burned with indignation. It was in this light, then, that her father judged Wolff von Arnim's grave, almost formal, courtesy, their innocent, straightforward friendship together! And yet, beneath the indignation, new fears and doubts stirred to life. She did not attempt to analyse them. Impatiently, as though seeking to escape from all self-interrogation, she picked up the second letter and tore it open. It was from Arnold. Like the man, the handwriting was bold and clear, the sentences abrupt, sincere, and unpolished. In a few lines he thanked her for her last letter, outlined the small events of his own life. He then plunged into the immediate future.

"Unexpectedly, I have been granted a year's leave to travel in Central Africa," he had written. "You can understand that I shall be only too glad to get out of England and to have some active work outside the usual military grind. I leave Southampton in two days' time, so that you will not have time to answer this. In any case, I do not want you to hurry. I reach Aden on the 10th. That will give you time to consider what I am going to say. Hitherto I have been silent as to the matter that lies nearest my heart, but now I am going so far from you I must speak, Nora. I believe that one day you will become my wife. I believe that it is so destined, and I believe you know it as well as I do. Our parting at Victoria convinced me, or at least it gave me the greatest possible hope. I believe that if I had jumped into the carriage beside you and taken you in my arms, you would have yielded. I was a fool to have hesitated, but perhaps it is best that you should decide in cold blood. You know what I have to offer you—an honest, clean devotion, not the growth of a

moment's passion, but of years. I know you and I love and understand you—even to your faults. You know me, and whether you love me or not, you at least know that I am a man who never changes, who will be twenty years hence what he is to-day. Is this to be despised? Is not reciprocal trust and understanding worth more than a shortlived passion? Nora, do not count it against me if I cannot write to you eloquently, if I am poor in all the outward elegancies of speech and manner. I have no metaphors to describe my love to you; no doubt I shall always fail in those graceful nothings which you seem to appreciate so much. I can only speak and act as a straightforward Englishman who offers a woman his honest love. For the second—but not the last time, if needs must be—will you be my wife? Consider well, dearest, and if you can, let me go into my exile with the blessed knowledge that in a short time—for I shall not wait a year—I may come and fetch you home. Nora..."

Hoofs clattered impatiently in the street outside. The Arnims' little maid opened the door and grinned with mysterious friendliness.

"*Der Herr Hauptmann ist unten und wartet*," she said. "*Gnädiges Fräulein mochten sofort kommen!*"

She spoke in a tone of command which her intense respect for "*den Herrn Hauptmann*" more than justified. Was not her "Schatz" in the Herr Hauptmann's battery, and did not he say every Sunday, when they walked out together, that the whole Army did not contain a finer officer or a more "*famoser Kerl*"?

"*Ich komme gleich*," Nora answered. She thrust the half-read letter into the pocket of her loose-fitting coat and ran downstairs. All the way she was thinking of Robert Arnold with a strange mingling of affection and pity. She thought how good and honest he was, and of the life of a woman who entrusted herself to his care—and then abruptly he passed out of her mind like a shadow dispersed by a broad, full ray of sunshine. Wolff von Arnim stood in the hall. His face was lifted to greet her, his hand outstretched. She took it. She tried to say something banal, something that would have broken the spell that had fallen upon her. Her lips refused to frame the words, and he too did not speak. Side by side they went out into the cold morning air. The orderly stood waiting with the two horses. Arnim motioned him on one side, and with sure strength and gentleness lifted Nora into the saddle.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked; and then, with a sudden change of tone, "Why, what is the matter? Did I hurt you? You are so pale."

Nora shook her head.

"It is nothing—nothing. I am quite all right. I lost my breath—that is all. You lifted me as though I were a mere feather."

She tried to laugh, but instead bit her lip and looked down into his face with a curious bewilderment. He had not hurt her, and yet some sensation that was near akin to pain had passed like an electric current right to the centre of her being.

"I am quite all right," she said again, and nodded as though to reassure him. "Please do not be so alarmed."

To herself she thought, "What is the matter with me? What has happened?"

These were the questions she asked herself incessantly as they walked their horses through the empty streets. She found no answer. Everything in her that had hitherto been was no more. All the old landmarks in her character, her confidence, her courage, her inexhaustible fund of life were gone, leaving behind them a revolution of unknown emotions whose sudden upheaval she could neither explain nor control. Her world had changed, but as yet it was a chaos where she could find no firm land, no sure place of refuge.

They left the town behind them and walked their horses through the long *allées* of stately trees. Almost without their knowledge their conversation, broken and curiously strained as it was, dropped into silence. The deadened thud of their horses' hoofs upon the soft turf was the only sound that broke the morning stillness, and the mists hanging low upon the earth, as yet undisturbed by the rising winter sun, intensified the almost ghostly forest loneliness. It was a loneliness that pierced like a cold wind through Nora's troubled soul. Though they had ridden the same way before, at the same hour, surrounded by the same grey shadows, she had never felt as she felt now—that they, alone of the whole world, were alive and that they were together. The clang of the park gates behind them had been like a voice whose warning, jarring tones echoed after them in the stillness, "Now you are alone—now you are alone!" What was there in this loneliness and silence? Why did it suffocate, oppress her so that she would have been thankful if a sudden breeze had stirred the fallen leaves to sound and apparent life? Why had she herself no power to break the silence with her own voice? She glanced quickly at the man beside her. Did

he also feel something of what she was experiencing that he had become so silent? Usually a fresh, vigorous gaiety had laughed out of his eyes to meet her. To-day he did not seem to know that she had looked at him, or even that she was there. His gaze was set resolutely ahead, his lips beneath the short fair moustache were compressed in stern, thoughtful lines which changed the whole character of his face, making him older, graver. Believing herself unobserved, even forgotten, Nora did not look away. She saw Arnim in a new light, as the worker, the soldier, the man of action and iron purpose. Every line of the broad-shouldered figure in the grey *Litewka* suggested power and energy, and the features, thrown into shadow by his officer's cap, were stamped with the same virile characteristics translated into intellect and will.

"What a man you are!" was the thought that flashed through Nora's mind, and even in that moment he turned towards her.

"It seems we are not the only ones out this morning," he said quietly. "There is a rider coming towards us—Bauer, if I am not mistaken. Let us draw a little on one side."

She followed his guidance, at the same time looking in the direction which he had indicated. The mists were thinning, and she caught the flash of a pale-blue uniform, and a moment later recognised the man himself.

"Yes, it is Lieutenant Bauer," she said.

The new-comer drew in his horse to a walk and passed them at the salute. Nora caught a glimpse of his face and saw there was an expression of cynical amusement which aroused in her all the old instinctive aversion. She stiffened in her saddle and the angry blood rushed to her cheeks.

"I am glad he is not in your regiment," she said impulsively.

"Why, Miss Ingestre?"

"Because I dislike him," she answered.

He did not smile at her blunt reasoning—rather, the unusual gravity in his eyes deepened.

"I have no right to criticise a comrade," he said; "only I want you to remember that in a great army such as ours there must always be exceptions, men who have forced their way for the sake of position—idlers, cads, and nonentities. There are not many, thank God, and they are soon weeded out, but I want you to believe that they are the exceptions."

"I do believe it," she said gently.

"Thank you." He waited a moment and then added, "It is a great deal to me that you should think well of us."

"I could not well do otherwise," she answered.

"I am a foreigner." The simple pronoun betrayed him, but Nora did not notice the change. She was gazing ahead, her brows knitted.

"That does not seem to make much difference," she said. "I used to think it would—only a few weeks ago. I must have been very young then. I am very young now, but not so young. One can learn more in an hour than in a lifetime."

"It all depends on the hour," he said, smiling.

"No—I think each hour has the same possibilities. It all depends on oneself. If one has opened one's heart——" She left the sentence unfinished, her thoughts reverting suddenly to her mother, and for a moment the man beside her was forgotten. But not for more than a moment. Then, with a shock, the consciousness of his presence aroused her, and she looked up at him. It was only his profile which she saw, but some subtle change in the bold outline and a still subtler change in herself quickened the beating of her heart. As once before that morning, she suffered an inexplicable thrill of pain and wondered at herself and at the silence again closing in about them. It was a silence which had its source more in themselves than in their surrounding world, for when the thud of galloping hoofs broke through the deadening wall of mist they did not hear it, or heard it unconsciously and without recognition. Only when it grew to a threatening thunder did it arouse Arnim from his lethargy. He turned in his saddle, and the next instant caught Nora's horse sharply to one side.

"It is Bauer again!" he said. "Take care!" He had acted not an instant too soon. The shadow which he had seen growing out against the grey wall behind them became sharply outlined, and like a whirlwind swept past them, escaping the haunch of Nora's horse by a hair's-breadth. The frightened animal shied, wrenching the reins from Arnim's grasp, and swerved across the narrow roadway. Whether she lost her nerve or whether in that moment she did not care Nora could not have said. The horse broke into a gallop, and she made no effort to check its dangerous speed. The rapid, exhilarating motion lifted her out of herself, the fresh, keen air stung colour to her cheeks and awoke in her a flash of her old fearless life.

"*Ruhe! Ruhe!*" she heard a voice say in her ear. "*Ruhe!*"

But she paid no heed to the warning. Quiet! That was what she most feared. It was from that ominous silence she was flying, and from the moment when it would reveal the mystery of her own heart. Rather than that silence, that revelation, better to gallop on and on until exhaustion numbed sensibility, hushed every stirring, unfathomed desire into a torpor of indifference! She felt at first no fear. The power to check her wild course had long since passed out of her hands, but she neither knew nor cared. She saw the forest rush by in a blurred, bewildering mist, and far behind heard the muffled thunder of horse's hoofs in hot pursuit. But she saw and heard as in some fantastic dream whose end lay in the weaving hands of an implacable Destiny. In that same dream a shadow crept up to her side, drew nearer till they were abreast; a grip of iron fell upon her bridle hand. Then for the first time she awoke and understood. And with understanding came fear. Her own grip upon the straining reins relaxed. She reeled weakly in the saddle, thinking, "This is indeed the end." But the shock for which she dimly waited did not come. Instead, miraculously supported, she saw the mists clear and trees and earth and sky slip back to their places before her eyes. The world, which for one moment had seemed to be rushing to its destruction, stood motionless, and Nora found herself in the saddle, held there by the strength she would have recognised, so it seemed to her, even if it had caught her up out of the midst of death. Arnim's face was bent close to hers, and its expression filled her with pity and a joy wonderful and inexplicable.

"*Wie haben Sie mir das anthun können?*" he stammered, and then, in broken, passionate English, "How could you? If anything had happened—do you not know what it would have meant to me?" With a hard effort he regained his self-possession and let her go. "You frightened me terribly," he said. "I—I am sorry."

"You have saved my life," she answered. "It is I who have to be sorry—that I frightened you."

She was smiling with a calm strangely in contrast to his painful but half-mastered agitation. The suspense of the last minutes was still visible in his white face, and the hand which he raised mechanically to his cap shook.

"It was Bauer's fault," he said. "He rode like a madman. I shall call him to account. We seem fated to cross each other."

"Then why call him to account—since it is Fate? After all, nothing has happened."

Had, indeed, nothing happened? She avoided his eyes, and the colour died from her cheeks.

"Let us go home," he said abruptly.

They walked their panting horses back the way they had come. As before, neither spoke. To all appearances nothing had changed between them, and yet the change was there. The sunlight had broken through the mists, the oppressive silence was gone, and life stirred in the long grasses, peered with wondering, timid eyes from amidst the shadows, where deer and squirrel and all the peaceful forest world watched and waited until the intruders had passed on and left them to their quiet. And in Nora's heart also the sun had risen. The chaos had resolved itself into calm; and though so long as the man with the pale, troubled face rode at her side she could give no account even to herself of the mysterious happiness which had come so suddenly and so strangely, she was yet content to wait and enjoy her present peace without question.

Thus they passed out of the gates and through the busy streets, Arnim riding close to her side, as though to shield her from every possible danger. But the silence between them remained unbroken. It was the strangest thing of all that, though throughout they had scarcely spoken, more had passed between them than in all the hours of the gay and serious comradeship they had spent together.

At the door of the Arnims' house Wolff dismounted and helped Nora to the ground. And as they stood for a moment hand in hand, he looked at her for the first time full in the eyes.

"I cannot thank God enough that you are safe," he said.

She heard in his low voice the last vibrations of the storm, and the thought that it was *her* danger which had shaken this man from his strong self-control overwhelmed her so that she could bring no answer over her lips. She turned and ran into the house, into her own room, where she stood with her hands clasped before her burning face, triumphant, intoxicated, swept away on a whirlwind of unmeasured happiness.

It is the privilege—the greatest privilege perhaps—of youth to be swept away on whirlwinds beyond the reach of doubt and fear, and Nora was very young. Over the new world which had risen like an island paradise out of the chaos of the old, she saw a light spread out in ever-widening circles till it enveloped her whole life. For Nora the child was dead, the woman in her had awakened because she loved for the first time and knew that she was loved.

It was a moment of supreme happiness, and, as such moments needs must be if our poor mortal hearts are to be kept working, shortlived. Even as her eager, listening ears caught the last echo of horses' hoofs outside, some one knocked at the door.

"Fräulein Nora, please come at once," a servant's voice called. "The Fräulein Hildegarde has been taken very ill, and she is asking for you."

"I am coming," Nora answered mechanically.

Her hands had fallen to her side. The whirlwind had dropped her, as is the way with whirlwinds, and she stood there pale and for the moment paralysed by the shock and an undefined foreboding.

## CHAPTER IX
### RENUNCIATION

Frau von Arnim was waiting at the door of Hildegarde's bedroom. In the half-light Nora saw only the dim outline of the usually grave and composed face, but the hand that took hers betrayed more than the brightest searchlight could have done. It was icy cold, steady, but with something desperate in its clasp.

"Nora, are you accustomed to people who are very ill?"

"My mother is often ill," Nora answered, and the fear at her heart seemed to pass into her very blood. "But surely Hildegarde—it is not serious?"

Frau von Arnim shook her head.

"I do not know," she said. "She fainted suddenly, and since then she has been in a feverish state which I do not understand. Poor little Hildegarde!"

She spoke half to herself, quietly, almost coldly. Only Nora, strung to that pitch of sensitiveness where the very atmosphere seems to vibrate in sympathy, knew all the stifled pain, the infinite mother-tenderness which the elder woman cloaked behind a stern reserve. And because the best of human hearts is a complicated thing answering at once to a dozen cross-influences, Nora's pity was intensified by the swift realisation that even her wonderful new happiness might be struck down in an hour, a minute, as this woman's had been.

"Let me look after her," she pleaded. "I can be such a good nurse. I understand illness—and I love Hildegarde."

Something like a smile relaxed Frau von Arnim's set features. The words had been so girlish in their enthusiasm and self-confidence.

"I know," she said, "and Hildegarde loves you. She has been asking after you ever since she recovered consciousness. Let us go in."

She opened the door softly and led the way into the silent room. The blinds had been drawn down, and the great four-posted bed loomed up grim and immense at the far end, seeming to swallow up the frail, motionless figure in its shadow.

Nora tiptoed across the heavy carpet.

"Hildegarde," she whispered, "are you better?"

The closed eyes opened full and looked at her.

"Yes, I am better. It is nothing. I fainted—only a little time after you had gone—and since then I have not been well." She stopped, her gaze, curiously intense and steadfast, still fixed on Nora's face. Her sentences had come in jerks in a rough, dry voice. She now stretched out her hand and caught Nora's arm.

"You enjoyed your ride?" she whispered. "Nothing happened?"

Troubled by the steady eyes and the feverish clasp, which seemed to burn through to her very bone, Nora answered hastily and with a forced carelessness.

"Nothing very much. Bruno bolted with me in the woods, and I do not know what might have happened if Herr von Arnim had not come to my rescue. It was all my fault."

Hildegarde turned her flushed face a little on one side.

"I knew something had happened," she said almost to herself. "It all came over me when I fainted. I knew everything."

Nora made no answer. She was thankful for the half-light, thankful that the large, dark eyes had closed as though in utter weariness. They had frightened her just as the conclusive "I know everything" had done by their infallible mysterious knowledge. "And even if you do know everything," she thought, "why should I mind?—why should I be afraid?" Nevertheless, fear was

hammering at her heart as she turned away. Frau von Arnim took her by the hand.

"She seems asleep," she whispered. "Let us leave her until the doctor comes. Then we shall know better what to do."

It was as though she had become suddenly anxious to get Nora away from the sick girl's bedside, and Nora yielded without protest. She felt that Hildegarde's need of her had passed; that she had indeed only waited to ask that one question, "Did anything happen?" before sinking into a feverish stupor. Silent, and strangely sick at heart, Nora followed Frau von Arnim from the room into the passage. There the elder woman took the troubled young face between her hands and kissed it.

"Hildegarde loves you," she said gravely. "I perhaps know best how much; but she has lost a great deal that makes life worth living, Nora, and sometimes bitterness rises above every other feeling. When that happens you must have pity and understanding. You must try and imagine what it would be like if you lost health and strength——" She stopped short, but Nora, struggling with the hard, painful lump in her throat, did not notice the break. She saw only in the sad eyes the same appeal that had met her on the first evening, "Be pitiful!" and, obeying an irresistible impulse, she put her arms about Frau von Arnim's neck in an outburst of conflicting feeling.

"I do understand!" she cried brokenly. "And I am so dreadfully sorry. I would do anything to help her—to make her happy!"

"I know you would, dear Nora; but that is not in your power or mine. She must learn happiness out of herself, as soon or late we all must do. We can only wait and be patient."

They said no more, but they kept together, as people do who find an instinctive consolation in each other's presence. An hour later the doctor arrived. He pronounced high fever, apparently without any direct cause, and ordered quiet and close watching.

"So far, it seems nothing serious," he said, with a thoughtful shake of the head, "but she is delicate and over-sensitive. Every mental excitement will work inevitably upon her health. She must be spared all trouble and irritation."

According to his suggestion, Frau von Arnim and Nora shared the task of watching in the sick-room. There was nothing for them to do, for Hildegarde lay inert and silent, apparently unconscious of their presence, and the hours slipped heavily past. At ten o'clock Nora took up her post. She had slept a little, and the dark rings beneath Frau von Arnim's eyes caused her to say gently:

"You must rest as long as you can. I am not tired. I could watch all night."

Frau von Arnim shook her head.

"I will come again at twelve," she said, with a faint smile. "Youth must have its sleep, and I shall be too anxious to be away long."

The door closed softly, and Nora was left to her lonely vigil. She stood for a moment in the centre of the room, overcome by a sudden uneasiness and fear. She had watched before, but never before had the silence seemed so intense, the room so full of moving shadows. Except for the reflection from the log fire and the thin ray of a shaded night-light, the apartment was in darkness, but to Nora's excited imagination the darkness was alive and only the outstretched figure beneath the canopy dead. The illusion was so strong that she crept closer, listening with beating heart. There was no sound. For one sickening moment it seemed as though her fear had become a reality—then a stifled sigh broke upon the stillness. Hildegarde stirred restlessly, and again there was silence, but no longer the same, no longer so oppressive. Death was as yet far off, and, relieved and comforted, Nora drew an arm-chair into the circle of firelight. From where she sat she could observe every movement of her charge without herself changing position, and for some time she watched anxiously, self-forgetful in the fulfilment of her duty. But then the fascination of the glowing logs drew her eyes away, and almost without her knowledge her thoughts slipped their leash and escaped from the gloomy room with its atmosphere of pain, out into the forest, back to the moment when life had broken out into full sunshine and happiness such as she had never known, and love incomparable, irresistible, swept down upon her and bore her with them into a new paradise. Who shall blame her if she saw in the bright flames not Hildegarde's pale, suffering face, but the features of the man who had wrought in her the great miracle which occurs once, surely, in every woman's life? Who shall blame her if a half-read letter and its writer were forgotten, or, if remembered, only with a tender pity such as all good women must feel for honest failure? And in that pity there was mingled a certain wonder at herself that she could ever have supposed her feeling for Robert Arnold to be love. What was the childish regret at parting, the casual affection for an old comrade, blown to a warmer glow by the first harsh winds of exile, compared to this—this wonderful Thing which in an instant had revealed to

her the possibility of a union where the loneliness, conscious or unconscious, surrounding each individual life is bridged and the barriers between mind and mind, heart and heart, are burnt down by the flames of a pure and noble passion? Poor Arnold! It was well for him that he could not know what was passing in Nora's mind nor see her face as she gazed into the fire. He might then have wished that his letter, with its bold self-confidence, had never been written. For the glow upon the young features was not all fire-shine, the starlight in the dreamy eyes not all reflected gleams from the burning logs upon the hearth. Both had their birth within, where the greatest of all human happiness had been kindled—but not by Arnold's hand.

Thus half an hour, and then an hour, slipped past. Lulled by her thoughts and the absolute quiet about her, Nora sank into a doze. The firelight faded into the distance, and half-dreaming, half-waking, she drifted into a chaotic world of fancies and realities. She dreamed at last that some one called her by name. She did not answer, and the call grew louder, more persistent. It seemed to drag her against her will back to full sensibility, and with a violent start Nora's eyes opened, and she knew that the voice had not been part of her dreams, but that Hildegarde was calling her with monotonous reiteration.

"Nora! Nora!"

"Yes, I am here. What is it?"

Nora drew softly to the bedside and took the outstretched hand in hers. It burnt, as though the feverish sparkle in the wide-opened eyes was but a signal of an inner devouring fire, and there was something, too, in the feeble smile which hurt Nora by reason of its very piteousness.

"I ought not to have disturbed you," Hildegarde said in a dry whisper. "It was selfish of me, but you looked so happy that I thought you could spare me a moment. I have been so frightened."

"Frightened, dear? Of what?"

"I do not know—of myself, I think."

She turned her fair head restlessly on the pillow, as though seeking to retrace some thought, and then once more she lifted her eyes to Nora. They seemed unnaturally large in the half-darkness, and their expression strangely penetrating. Nevertheless, when she spoke again Nora felt that they sought rather to convey a message than to question.

"Nora, you will laugh at me—I want to know, have I been talking—in my sleep, I mean?"

"No."

"I am glad." Again the same half-pleading, half-frightened smile played about the colourless lips. "I have been having such mad dreams—not bad dreams—only so—so untrue, so unreal. I should not have liked you to know them. You might have thought——" She stopped, and her clasp tightened.

"You know how I love you, don't you, Nora?"

"Yes, I think so—more than I deserve."

"Not as much, but still, very dearly. That was what I wanted to tell you. It seems foolish—in the middle of the night like this; but I was so afraid you would not understand. You do, though, don't you?"

"Of course." Nora spoke soothingly, but with a dim knowledge that she had not wholly understood. There was, indeed, a message in those broken sentences, but one to which she had no key.

"You have been good to me," Hildegarde went on rapidly. "Though you possess all that makes life worth living, you have not jarred on me with your wealth. You have not tried to comfort me with the truism that there are others more suffering than I—such a poor sort of comfort, isn't it? As though it made me happy to think that more suffering was possible—inevitable! When I am ill, I like to think that I am the exception—that the great law of life is happiness. And you are life and happiness personified, Nora, and so I love you. I love you so that I grudge you nothing—shall never grudge you anything. That is—what—I want—you to understand!" The last words came like a sigh, and there was a long silence. The earnest eyes had closed, and she seemed to sleep. Nora knelt down by the bedside, still holding the thin white hand between her own, and so remained until, overcome by weariness, her head sank on to the coverlet. Half an hour passed, and then suddenly a rough movement startled her from her dreams. Again she heard her name called, this time desperately, wildly, as though the caller stood at the brink of some hideous chasm.

"Nora! Nora!"

Nora made no answer. She stumbled to her feet and stood half-paralysed, looking at the features which in an instant had undergone so terrible a change. Hildegarde sat bolt upright. Her hair was disordered, her eyes, gleaming out of the ashy face, were fixed on the darkness behind Nora with a terrible entreaty in their depths.

"Nora! Nora! what have you done?"

Nora recovered herself with an effort. Usually strong of nerve, there was something in the voice, in the words, which terrified her.

"Hildegarde, what do you mean? What is the matter?"

"Oh, Nora, Nora, what have you done?"

The voice had sunk to a moan so piteous, so wretched, that Nora forgot the cold fear which for a moment held her paralysed. She tried to press the frail figure gently back among the pillows.

"Dear, I don't know what you mean. But you must lie quiet. To-morrow you can tell me everything——"

Hildegarde pushed her back and put her hand wildly to her head.

"Of course, you can't help it. You don't even know. How should you? A cripple—you would never even think of it. Nobody would—they would laugh at me or pity me. Wolff pities me now—but not then. Oh, Wolff! Wolff!"

The name burst from the dry lips in a low cry of pain. Hitherto she had spoken in English; she went on in German, but so clearly and with such vivid meaning in tone and gesture that Nora, cowering at the foot of the bed, felt that she would have understood had it been in some dead, unknown language.

"Wolff, how good you are to me! Shall we gallop over there to the bridge? How splendid it is to be alive, isn't it? Yes, of course I shall keep the supper waltz for you, if you really want it. We always have such fun together. Look! There is the Kaiser on the brown horse! And Wolff is leading the battery with Seleneck! How splendid he looks! Oh, Wolff! Wolff!"

Again the old cry, vibrating with all the unspoken love and pride and happiness which the short, disjointed sentences had but indicated! They had painted for the dazed, heart-stricken listener vivid pictures from the past—the long, joyous gallops over the open country, the brilliant ballroom, the parade, all the laughter, the music, the lights, and chivalresque clash of arms—but in that one name a life had been revealed, the inner life of a girl ripening to a pure and loving woman.

The tears burned Nora's eyes. Every word that fell from the delirious lips struck a deeper, more fatal blow at her own happiness, yet she could not have fled, could not have stopped her ears against their message.

"You must work hard, Wolff," the voice went on, sunk to a sudden gentleness. "Perhaps one day you will do something wonderful—something that will help to make us the greatest country in the world. How proud we shall be of you! I am proud already! Steady, Bruno! How wild you are this morning! One last gallop! Oh, Wolff, don't look like that! It is nothing—nothing at all! Only my back hurts. Am I not too heavy? You are so strong." And then, with a smothered exclamation of anguish: "Wolff, the doctor says I shall never ride again!"

A long, unbroken silence. The young, suffering face had grown grey and pinched. There were lines about the mouth which made it look like that of an old woman. A log fell with a crash into the fireplace. The voice went on, toneless, expressionless:

"How the light shines on her face! She is so pretty, and she can walk and ride. She is not half dead, like I am. No wonder he stands and watches her! Wolff, why do you stand there? Why do you look like that? Won't you come and sit by me? No, no, why should you? It is better so. You play well together. *Tristan und Isolde*—I wonder if it is Fate. They have gone out riding. I am glad. I wished it. When one is a cripple one must conquer oneself. I can see them riding through the park gates. They look splendid together—so handsome and young and strong. Now they are galloping. Oh, my God, my God! Nora, what are you doing? Something has happened! Oh, Wolff, Wolff! I know—I know you love her!"

The voice, which had risen from note to note as though urged by some frightful inner tumult of fear, now sank to silence. Hildegarde fell back among the pillows. With that final tragic recognition her mind seemed once more to be shrouded in oblivion. The look of agony passed from her features. She was young again, young and beautiful and at peace.

Nora stumbled. She would have fallen at the bedside had not a hand, seeming to stretch out of the darkness, caught her and held her. It was Frau von Arnim. How long she had been there Nora could not tell. She felt herself being drawn gently but firmly away.

"Go to your room, Nora. Lie down and sleep. I should never have left you. Poor child!"

In the midst of her grief the tones of deep, generous pity awoke in Nora's heart a strange awe and wonder. She did not dare meet Frau von Arnim's eyes. It was as though she knew she would see there a tragedy greater than her own, a pain too sacred for words of comfort. She crept from

the room, leaving mother and daughter alone.

"Nora, Nora, what have you done?"

The words followed her; they rang in her ears as she flung herself down by her table, burying her face in her arms in a passion of despair.

"What have I done?" she asked again and again. And all that was generous and chivalrous in her answered:

"She loved you, and you have stolen her one happiness from her. You are a thief. You have done the cruellest, meanest thing of your life."

Justice protested:

"How could you have known? You did not even know that *you* loved, or were loved—not till this morning."

Then the memory of that morning, that short-lived happiness already crumbled and in ruins, swept over her and bore down the last barriers of her self-control. Poor Nora! She sobbed as only youth can sob face to face with its first great grief, desperately, unrestrainedly, believing that for her at least life and hope were at an end. Another less passionate, less governed by emotion would have reasoned, "It is not your fault. You need not suffer!" Nora only saw that, wittingly or unwittingly, she had helped to heap sorrow upon sorrow for a being who had shown her only kindness and love. She had brought fresh misfortune where she should have brought consolation; she had dared to love where she had no right to love; she had kindled a love in return which could only mean pain—perhaps worse—to those who had given her their whole trust and affection. She had done wrong, and for her there was only one punishment—atonement by renunciation.

The grey winter dawn crept into the little bedroom, and Nora still sat at her table. She was no longer crying. Her eyes were wide open and tearless. Only an occasional shudder, a rough, uneven sigh, told of the storm that had passed over her. As the light grew stronger she took up a crumpled letter and read it through, very slowly, as though each word cost her an effort. When she had finished she copied an address on to an envelope and began to write to Robert Arnold. Her hand shook so that she had to tear up the first sheet and begin afresh, and even then the words were scarcely legible. Once her courage almost failed her, but she pulled herself back to her task with a pathetic tightening of the lips.

"I know now that I do not love you," she wrote. "I know, because I have been taught what love really is; but if you will take me with the little I have to give, I will be your wife."

And with that she believed that she had raised an insurmountable barrier between herself and the love which fate had made sinful.

## CHAPTER X
### YOUTH AND THE BARRIER

It was Hildegarde's birthday. The November sunshine had come out to do her honour, and in every corner of her room rich masses of winter flowers rejoiced in the cold brightness which flooded in through the open window. Hildegarde herself lay on the sofa, where the light fell strongest. The two long weeks in which she had hung between life and death had wrought curiously little change in her, and what change there was lay rather in her expression than in her features. Her cheeks were colourless, but she had always been pale, and the ethereal delicacy which had become a very part of herself, and which seemed to surround her with an atmosphere of peaceful sanctity, was more spiritual than physical. Nora, who stood beside her, watching the sunlight as it made a halo of the fair hair, could not think of her as a suffering human being. It was surely a spirit that lay there, with the bunch of violets clasped in the white hands—a spirit far removed from all earthly conflict, upheld by some inner strength and softened by a grave, serene wisdom. And yet, Nora knew, it was only an heroic "seeming." She knew what pictures passed before the quiet eyes, what emotions lay hidden in the steady-beating heart, what pain the gentle lips held back from utterance. Admiration, pity, and love struggled in Nora's soul with the realisation of her own loss and the total ruin of her own happiness. "But I have done right," she repeated to herself, with a kind of desperate defiance, "and one day, if you are happy, it will be because I also brought my sacrifice in silence." It was her one consolation—a childish one enough, perhaps—the conviction that she had done right. It was the one thing which upheld her when she thought of the letter speeding to its destination and of the fate she had chosen for

herself. But it had not prevented the change with which grief and struggle mark the faces of the youngest and the bravest.

Down below in the street the two quiet listeners heard the tramp of marching feet which stopped beneath their window, and presently a knock at the door heralded a strange apparition. A burly under-officer in full dress stood saluting on the threshold.

"The regiment brings *Gnädiges Fräulein* its best wishes for her birthday," he thundered, as though a dozen luckless recruits stood before him. "The regiment wishes *Gnädiges Fräulein* health and happiness, and hopes that she will approve of the selection which has been made." He advanced with jingling spurs and held out a sheet of paper, which Hildegarde accepted with a gentle smile of thanks.

"It is a nice programme, isn't it?" she said, as she handed the list to Nora. "All my favourites."

"It was the Herr Hauptmann who told us what *Gnädiges Fräulein* liked," the gruff soldier said, still in an attitude of rigid military correctness. "The Herr Hauptmann will be here himself before long. He commanded me to tell *Gnädiges Fräulein*."

"Thank you, Huber—and thank the regiment for its good wishes. Afterwards—when the concert is over—well, you know what is waiting for you and your men in the kitchen."

He bowed stiffly over her extended hand.

"*Danke, Gnädiges Fräulein*." He strode back to the door, and then turned and hesitated, his weather-beaten face a shade redder.

"The regiment will lose the Herr Hauptmann soon," he said abruptly.

"Yes, Huber. And then what will you do?"

"Go too, *Gnädiges Fräulein*. I have served my country many years, and when the Herr Hauptmann leaves the regiment I have had enough. One gets old and stiff, and the time comes when one must take off the helmet."

"That is true, Huber."

Still he hesitated.

"And *Gnädiges Fräulein*——?"

"I, Huber?"

"*Gnädiges Fräulein* will go with the Herr Hauptmann?"

A deep wave of colour mounted the pale cheeks.

"It is possible we may go to Berlin for a few months."

"*Ja, ja*, for a few months!" He laughed, and his laugh was like the rumble of distant thunder. "It is well, *Gnädiges Fräulein*; it is well." Then suddenly he stiffened, growled an "*Empfehle mich gehorsamst*," and was gone.

Hildegarde bowed her head over the violets and there was a long silence. Then she too laughed so naturally and gaily that Nora forgot herself and looked at her in wondering surprise.

"He is such a strange old fellow," Hildegarde explained. "Wolff calls him his nurse. Once in the manoeuvres he saved Wolff's life, and ever since then he has attached himself to the family, and looks upon us all more or less as his children. He is never disrespectful, and so we allow him his little idiosyncrasies. One of his pet ideas is that Wolff should marry me."

Nora repressed a start. What strange thing was this that Hildegarde should speak so lightly, so carelessly, of the tragic loss overshadowing both their lives?

"I think it would quite break his heart if we disappointed him," Hildegarde added quietly. "Is it not amusing?"

"Amusing?" Nora's hand gripped the back of the sofa. "I do not see why it should be amusing—it is natural. Of course"—she struggled to overcome the roughness in her voice—"every one sees how much your—your cousin cares for you."

Again the same easy laugh answered her.

"Why, Nora, you are as bad as our military matchmaker! Of course, Wolff is fond of me just as I am of him. We are like brother and sister; but marriage—that is quite another matter. I am afraid I could never bring myself to marry a man whose heart-affairs I have known ever since he was an absurd little cadet."

Nora pushed the hair from her forehead. She felt as though the ground had suddenly been torn from under her feet. Every resolution, every principle, the very spirit of sacrifice to which she had clung, had been shaken by those few simple words. Had she dreamed, then, that night when delirium had broken open the innermost sanctuary of Hildegarde's heart? Had it all been a wild fancy, and was this the truth? Or—— She looked full into the face raised to hers. There was a quiet merriment in the steady eyes—a merriment which yielded gradually to concern, but there was no sign of pain, no trace of struggle. It was impossible to believe that those eyes held their

secret, or that the smiling lips had once uttered a cry of the greatest human agony. Yes, it was impossible, and if impossible, why, then—— Nora could think no further. She turned and walked mechanically to the window. The military band had begun the wedding-march out of *Lohengrin*, but for her it was no more than a confused sound beating against her brains. She heard the house-gate click, and saw a well-known figure slowly mount the steps, but she could not rouse herself to speak or think. She stood stunned and helpless, knowing nothing of the pitying eyes that watched her. In those moments a faint change had come over Hildegarde von Arnim's features. The smile had died, and in its place had come a grave peace—a peace such as is given sometimes with renunciation. Then her eyes closed and she seemed to sleep, but her hands held fast to the purple violets, and the sunlight falling upon the quiet face revealed a line that is also renunciation's heritage.

Meanwhile Wolff von Arnim had entered the state drawing-room, whither the little housemaid, overwhelmed by the plumes and glittering epaulettes, had considered fit to conduct him. It was the one spot in the whole house which Frau von Arnim had not been able to stamp with her own grace and elegance. The very chairs seemed to have entered into a conspiracy to appear stiff, and stood in comfortless symmetrical order, and the fire smouldering upon the hearth could do nothing against the chill atmosphere of an unloved and seldom inhabited dwelling-room.

Arnim went straight to the window. It was as though his surroundings pressed upon him with an intolerable burden, and he remained staring sightlessly out into the grey morning until the quiet opening of a door told him that he was no longer alone. Even then he did not at once turn. Only the slight convulsive tightening of the hand upon the sword-hilt betrayed that he had heard, and Frau von Arnim had almost reached his side before he swung round to greet her.

"Aunt Magda!" he exclaimed.

She gave him her hand, and he bent over it—remained so long with his head bowed that it seemed a conscious prolongation of the time before their eyes must meet.

"I hardly expected you this afternoon," she said gently, "certainly not in such *grande tenue*. Are you on special duty?"

He did not answer at once. He stood looking at her with a curiously absent expression.

"I came to ask after Hildegarde," he said. "Is she better?"

"Yes, much better—still very weak, of course. A fever like that is not quickly forgotten."

She had slipped her arm through his and led him to the sofa before the fire.

"The violets you sent are most beautiful," she went on. "They gave Hildegarde so much pleasure. She asked me to thank you for them."

He sat down beside her and for a moment was silent, gazing into the fire.

"Aunt Magda," he then began abruptly, "you have never told me what it was that caused Hildegarde's illness—nor even what was the matter with her. I—I want to know."

A faint, rather weary smile passed over Frau von Arnim's lips.

"Illness with Hildegarde is never far off, *lieber Junge*," she said. "She is like an ungarrisoned castle exposed to the attack of every enemy. The least thing—something which leaves you and me unharmed—throws her off her balance no one knows how or why."

"And she was once so strong!" he said, half to himself. "Nothing could tire her, and she was never ill—never."

"Wolff, there is no good in remembering what was and can never be again."

"Never?" he queried.

"Not so far as we can see."

His strongly marked brows knitted themselves in pain.

"Would to God it had all happened to me!" he broke out impulsively. "Then it would not have been so bad."

"It would have been much worse," Frau von Arnim answered. "Women suffer better than men, Wolff. It is one of their talents. After a time, Hildegarde will find consolation where you would only have found bitterness."

"After a time!" he repeated. "Then she is not happy? Poor Hildegarde!"

"Even women cannot learn patience and resignation in a day."

He sprang up as though inactivity had become unbearable.

"Aunt Magda—if she is strong enough—I want to see Hildegarde."

"Why?"

Involuntarily their eyes met in a quick flash of understanding.

"Because I think that it is time for our relationship to each other to be clearly settled," he

said. "Ever since our childhood it has been an unwritten understanding that if Hildegarde would have me we should marry; and so I have come to ask her—if she will be my wife."

He spoke bluntly, coldly, not as he had meant to speak, but the steady gaze on his face shook his composure.

"Have you the right to ask her that?"

"Aunt Magda!"

"Or, after all, have you been playing with the affections of a girl who has the right to my protection?"

"Aunt Magda—that is not true—that——"

He stopped short, pale with agitation, his lips close compressed on the hot words of self-vindication.

For a minute Frau von Arnim waited as though giving him time to speak, and then she went on quietly:

"Wolff, we Arnims are not fond of charity. We prefer to eat out our hearts in silence rather than be objects of the world's pity. And Hildegarde is like the rest of us. She will not ask for your sympathy nor your care nor your devotion. She will ask you for your whole heart. Can you give her that?"

He made a gesture as though about to give a hasty answer, but her eyes stopped him.

"I—love Hildegarde," he stammered. "We have been friends all our lives."

"Friends, Wolff! I said 'your whole heart.'"

And then he saw that she knew; and suddenly the tall, broad-shouldered man dropped down, sword-clattering, at her side and buried his face in his hands. The smile in Frau von Arnim's eyes deepened. So he had done in the earlier days when youthful scrapes and disappointments had sent the usually proud, reserved boy to the one unfailing source of understanding and consolation. Very gently she rested her hand upon his shoulder.

"Shall you never grow up, Wolff?" she said with tender mockery. "Shall you always be a big schoolboy, with the one difference that you have grown conceited and believe that you can hide behind a full-dress uniform and a gruff military voice—even from my eyes?"

He lifted his flushed, troubled face to hers.

"You know—everything?" he asked.

"Everything, *lieber Junge*. Hildegarde knows, Johann knows, the cook knows. I should not be surprised if the very sparrows make it a subject of their chattering. And you can go about with that stern face and mysterious, close-shut mouth and think you have deceived us all! Oh, Wolff, Wolff!"

"You are laughing at me," he said. "God knows I am in deadly earnest."

She took his hand between her own.

"If I laugh at you it is because I must," she said; "because it is the only thing to do. There are some forms of quixotic madness which it is dangerous to take seriously, and this is one of them. Wolff, you have tortured yourself with an uncalled-for remorse until you are ready to throw your own life and the lives of others into a huge catastrophe. In all this, have you thought what it might mean to Nora?"

He started, and the colour ebbed out of his face, leaving it curiously pale and haggard.

"I think of her day and night," he said hoarsely. "I pray God that she does not know—that I shall pass out of her life and leave no trace behind me."

"You believe that that is possible? You deceive yourself so well? You pretend you do not love Nora, and you do not know that she loves you?"

"That I love her? Yes, I know that," he confessed desperately. "But that she loves me—how should I know?"

"Any one would know—you must know." She put both her hands on his shoulders and looked him firmly in the face. "Wolff, if you were honest you would admit it. You would see that you have acted cruelly—without intention, but still cruelly."

"Then if I have been cruel, I have been most cruel against myself," he answered. "But I meant to do what was right—I meant to act honestly. It is true when I say I love Hildegarde. I do love her—not perhaps as a man should love his wife, but enough, and I had sworn that I would make her happy, that I would compensate her for all that she has lost. I swore that to myself months ago—before Nora came. When Nora came, Aunt Magda"—his voice grew rough—"there are some things over which one has no power, no control. It was all done in a minute. If I had been honest, I should have gone away, but it would have been too late. And as it was I deceived myself with a dozen lies. I stayed on and saw her daily, and the thing grew until that morning when Bruno

bolted. I lost my head then. When it was all over I could not lie and humbug any more. I had to face the truth. It was then Hildegarde fell ill. I felt it as a sort of judgment."

He spoke in short, jerky sentences, his face set and grey with the memory of a past struggle. He sprang to his feet and stood erect at Frau von Arnim's side.

"Whatever else I am, I am not consciously a cad," he said. "What I had done wrong I was determined to put right at all costs. I loved Hildegarde, and I had dedicated my life to her happiness. Nothing and no one must turn me from my purpose. That is why I am here this morning." He made an impatient gesture. "I have been a fool. You have seen through me—you have made me tell you what torture would not have dragged out of me. But that can alter nothing."

For a moment Frau von Arnim watched his stern, half-averted face in silence. Then she too rose.

"I have a message for you from Hildegarde," she said quietly.

He started.

"For me?"

"Yes. Those who suffer have quick eyes, quicker intuitions. She saw this coming, and she asked me to tell you—should it come—that she loved you too much to accept a useless sacrifice. For it would have been useless, Wolff. You deceive yourself doubly if you believe you could have made Hildegarde happy. Yes, if you had brought your whole heart—then, perhaps; but it is almost an insult to have supposed that she would have been satisfied with less. Since her illness she has told me everything, and we have talked it over, and this is our answer to you: Take the woman you love; be happy, and be to us what you always were. In any other form we will have nothing to do with you!"

She was smiling again, but Arnim turned away from the outstretched hands.

"It is awful!" he said roughly. "I cannot do it—I cannot!"

"You must, Wolff. Let time pass over it if you will, but in the end you must yield. You dare not trample on your own happiness, on Nora's, on Hildegarde's—yes, Hildegarde's," she repeated emphatically. "In the end she will find happiness in her own renunciation. She loves you both, and the first bitterness is already past. And why wait? There may be struggles enough before you both, though I shall do my best to help you. Go to Nora and make her happy. Believe me, *lieber Junge*, the heart-ache has not been all on your side."

He had taken her hands now and was kissing them with a passionate, shame-faced gratitude.

"You make me feel the lowest, meanest thing on earth," he said. "And Hildegarde is an angel—far too good for me."

"Yes; that is the best way to put it," she said. "Hildegarde is too good for you. And now perhaps it would be wise for you to go in search of the woman who is your equal."

"Not now," he said. "I could not. I must be alone a little. It has all happened so suddenly. My whole life and future has changed in a minute."

"Do as you think best, dear Wolff. But do not wait long."

He pressed her hand again in farewell.

"You love Nora?" he asked.

"Yes; otherwise I would not have let things drift. There are many barriers between you—race and language are not the least—and we had thought of a match—since Hildegarde's illness—more, perhaps, in accordance with our family traditions. But Nora is a dear, sweet child, and, I believe, will make you a good wife. At any rate, I shall do all I can to smooth your path, and Hildegarde and I will be happy to welcome her as one of us."

He smiled, half in gratitude, half in doubt.

"You seem very sure that she will have me," he said. "Everybody does not think me such a fine fellow as you do."

"*Lieber Junge*, I am a woman, and when I see a girl grow thin and pale without apparent cause—well, I look for the cause. Nora has been very unhappy in the last days. I suspect strongly she has been suffering from your conflict, and no doubt looks upon her life and happiness as ruined. That is why I tell you not to wait too long."

There was so much affection in her tone that the faint mockery in her words left no sting.

"I will not wait long, I promise you," Wolff said.

At the door he turned and looked back at her. It was almost as though he had meant to surprise her into a betrayal of some hidden feeling; but Frau von Arnim had not moved, nor was there any change in the grave face.

"Tell Hildegarde that I shall never forget," he said earnestly, "that I owe her my happiness,

and that I thank her."

"I shall give her your message," Frau von Arnim answered.

The fate that arranges the insignificant, all-important chances of our lives ordained that at the same moment when Wolff von Arnim passed out of the drawing-room Nora Ingestre came down the stairs. She held an open telegram in her hand, and the light from the hall window fell on a face white with grief and fear.

Arnim strode to meet her.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

"My mother is very ill," she answered faintly. "They have sent for me."

She had descended the last step. The next instant Wolff von Arnim was at her side, and had taken her in his arms.

"*Mein Liebling!*" he whispered. "*Mein armes Liebling!*"

She yielded, overwhelmed by the swiftness of his action, by her own wild heart-throb of uncontrollable joy. Then she tried to free herself.

"You must not!" she cried. "It is not right!"

"My wife!" he retorted triumphantly. "My wife!"

She looked up into his face. At no time had he been dearer to her, seemed more worthy of her whole love, than he did then, with his own joy subdued by an infinite tenderness and pity. But the name "wife" had rung like a trumpet-call, reminding and threatening even as it tempted.

"Oh, Wolff!" she said, "you must let me go. It is not possible—you do not understand. I——"

She was going to tell him of the barrier she had raised with her own hands, of the letter that was on its way. She was going to say to him, "I am not free. My word is given to another. Seek your happiness where it awaits you." In some such words she meant to shatter her own life and lay the first stones of the atonement to the girl whose happiness she had stolen. Or, after all, had it been no theft? Was it not possible that she had been deceived? And even if it were true, had it not been said, "A useless sacrifice is no sacrifice at all"? Had she not a right to her happiness? And Wolff was speaking, and it seemed to her that his joy and triumph answered her.

"Nothing can come between us and our love!" he said. "Nothing and no one! Oh, Nora, *ich habe dich so endlos lieb*!"

The barrier, the letter, Hildegarde, every heroic resolution was forgotten, swept away by the man's passion and her own exulting love. Nora leant her head against the dark-blue coat in reckless, thankful surrender.

"*Ich habe dich so endlos lieb!*" he repeated. "*Kannst du mich auch lieb haben?*"

And she answered fearlessly:

"I love you!" and kissed him.

Such was Nora Ingestre's brief courtship and betrothal.

## CHAPTER XI

### WOLFF MAKES HIS DEBUT IN DELFORD

The family Ingestre was once more united. As far as could be judged from appearances, the union was a complete one. Domestic peace and prosperity seemed to hover like benignant spirits over the tableau which concluded the day's round. Mrs. Ingestre lay as usual on her couch beneath the light of the tall red-shaded lamp, her husband was seated at the table, poring over a volume of the latest dogma, whilst his son, still suffering from the results of a nervous breakdown (attributed to overwork), reclined in the most comfortable arm-chair by the fireside, and imbibed military wisdom from a London daily. If there was any note of discord in this harmony, it came from Nora. She stood opposite her brother, with her elbow resting on the mantelpiece, and the firelight betrayed a warning flash in the wide-open eyes and a tense line about the mouth which boded not altogether well for peace. Her father had glanced once or twice over his spectacles in her direction, but had seemed satisfied. On the whole, she had taken her abrupt and alarming recall with surprising docility and had accepted the obvious exaggeration of the Rev. John's report concerning her mother without resentment. Mrs. Ingestre had been ill, but then she was always more or less ill, and the degree more had scarcely justified the good gentleman's excited telegram. Were the truth admitted, he had been glad to seize upon an excuse to withdraw Nora from the "pernicious influence" of her foreign surroundings, and the strain of copying his sermons and attending to his own affairs generally had given the casting vote. As it has been

said, Nora's docility had been as agreeable as it was surprising, and he attributed it to causes very satisfactory to himself. It was obvious, as he had explained triumphantly to Mrs. Ingestre, that Nora had had a bitter lesson "amongst these foreigners," and was only too glad to be home. Hitherto Nora had allowed him to cherish this delusion—hence the undisturbed peace in the family circle.

The French clock on the mantelpiece struck nine. Nora started and looked up, as though she had been waiting for the sound. Then she turned and stood with her back to the fire, her hands clasped behind her, her head held resolutely. "Father and mother," she began, "I have something important to tell you."

The Rev. John turned over a page before considering the speaker. The formality of the address and Nora's general attitude would have startled him if he had been any judge of outward and visible signs, but he was one of those men who only see what they have made up their mind to see, and just at that moment he was determined to look upon Nora in something of the light of a returned and repentant prodigal.

"Well, my dear," he asked indulgently, "what is it?"

"I want to tell you"—Nora took a deep breath—"that I am engaged to be married."

The Rev. John removed his spectacles.

"To whom?"

"To Captain von Arnim."

For a full minute her father said nothing. Miles sat up as though a bomb had exploded in his close proximity. Only Mrs. Ingestre remained unmoved. She was watching her daughter with grave, thoughtful eyes, but there was an unmistakable, half-whimsical, half-pitying smile about her mouth. The Rev. John passed his hand over his head, thereby ruffling a thin wisp of hair, which, usually decorously smoothed over a wide surface, now stood on end in a fashion wholly inconsistent with the seriousness of the moment. But of this he was fortunately ignorant. To do him justice, his agitation was unfeigned. The blow had demoralised him, and to cover the momentary mental paralysis he took refuge in an obstinate refusal to understand what had been said to him.

"My dear," he began amiably, "you mentioned that some one was going to be married—I did not catch the names. Would you mind repeating——?

"I said that Captain von Arnim has asked me to be his wife," Nora answered steadily.

"The impertinence of the fellow!" Miles had by this time recovered his self-possession sufficiently to speak. "I hope you sent him to the right-about?"

"I kissed him," Nora explained, with a gleam of humour.

"Nora!"

"There was no reason why I shouldn't. He is to be my husband."

Miles swore under his breath. The Rev. John rose with what would have been dignity but for his ruffled hair-dress.

"Nora—you—you—are talking nonsense," he jerked out. "I cannot believe that you know what you are saying. A—a—foreigner—a—a man of whom I know nothing!——"

"You will get to know him in time," Nora put in hastily.

"Do not interrupt me. I am grieved—shocked beyond words. I can only suppose that you have been led astray—eh—blinded by the glamour of a uniform. It is terrible. This is the reward of my weakness. Have I not always seen this coming?"—(here the reverend gentleman exaggerated, since the gift of prophecy had not been granted him)—"have I not always protested against your absence? But I at least supposed that—that Frau von Arnim was a woman who could be trusted—who would protect you from the—eh—attentions of a——"

"Frau von Arnim is the best woman I have ever met, except mother," Nora broke in again. "As to Wolff——"

"Wolff!" Miles laughed loudly. "Just think of it, people! 'Wolff' for my brother-in-law! A German bounder in the family! Many thanks!"

There was a moment's electric silence. The Rev. John had by this time recovered his professional eloquence, and was preparing to settle down to the work of exhortation with a zest. It was perhaps fortunate that Nora's face was turned away, otherwise he might have found less pleasure in listening to his own rounded periods.

"Miles puts the matter a trifle pointedly," he began, "but, on the whole, he expresses my own views. For many reasons I strongly disapprove of an English girl marrying out of her people, and as you are too young and inexperienced to appreciate those reasons, you must submit to my simple authority. I must, dear child, absolutely refuse my consent to this premature and

regrettable engagement. I have no doubt that Frau von Arnim will see for herself that in her anxiety to effect an advantageous alliance for her nephew she has been over-hasty—I must say, inexcusably hasty, in giving her sanction."

"Thank goodness *that* is knocked on the head!" Miles said, rising triumphantly to his feet. "I swear to you, the bare possibility makes me feel positively faint. We all know what German officers are like—bullying drinkers and gamblers——"

Nora turned and looked at him. There was something very like hatred in her dangerously bright eyes.

"I forbid you to speak like that of a class to which my future husband belongs!" she said. "Besides what you said being nonsense, it is also cowardly to attack where no chance is given to defend. As to my engagement"—she turned again to her father, and her voice grew calm and firm—"whether you give your consent or not makes no real difference. In a short time I shall be of age, and then I shall marry Wolff. We can afford to wait, if it must be."

"Nora!" The Rev. John recovered his breath with difficulty. "How can you—how dare you speak to me like that? Have you forgotten that I am your father—that——"

"I have not forgotten anything," Nora interrupted, in the same steady accents, "but it would be hypocritical of me to pretend a submission which I do not feel and which I should consider disloyal. Hitherto my duty has been towards you—it is now due to the man whom I love above every other earthly consideration. It does not matter in the least to me that Wolff is a foreigner. If he were a Hottentot it would make no difference."

Neither the Rev. John nor his son found any immediate answer. They looked at the proud, determined face, and perhaps in various degrees of distinctness each realised that Nora the child was a creature of the past, and that this was a woman who stood before them, armed and invulnerable in the strength of her awakened passion.

The Rev. John, completely thrown out of his concept by this unexpected revelation, looked at his wife with the weak appeal of a blusterer who suddenly discovers that he has blustered in vain. Mrs. Ingestre saw the look—possibly she had been waiting for it.

"I think that, if all Nora says is true, we have no right to interfere," she said quietly, "and the best thing we can do is to ask Captain von Arnim to come and see us. What do you say, Nora?"

Nora's whole face lit up, but she said nothing, only looked at her father and waited. Had she burst out into a storm of girlish delight and gratitude, the Rev. John might have plucked up courage and held his ground, but that steady self-repression indicated a strength of purpose of which he himself was incapable. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Since my authority is denied in my own house, there is no object in appealing to me," he said peevishly. "Do what you like—only, in the future remember that I warned you. You have taken your life into your own hands, Nora. I can no longer hold myself responsible."

"All I beg is that I shall be allowed to keep out of the way when the beggar comes here," Miles said, as he followed his indignant parent out of the room.

The moment the door had closed Nora left her place of defence by the fire and came to Mrs. Ingestre's side.

"I know you are wondering why I did not tell you before, mother," she said rapidly and clearly. "It was because I did not want to drag you into it more than I could help. I know what you have to bear when father thinks you are 'abetting' me. I wanted to fight my battle alone."

"And I suppose you think you have won, Nora?"

"Yes, I think so. Father can do nothing."

"I was not thinking of that."

Nora looked down into the pale face and wondered at the pity which mingled with the tenderness of its expression.

"Of what were you thinking, mother?"

Mrs. Ingestre sighed.

"Are you so sure of yourself, little girl?" she asked gently. "Is your love really above every earthly consideration? Can you give up your home, your country, your language, your ways, us—your people, without a heart-ache? Do you realise that you are bringing your love the greatest of all sacrifices?"

"Mother, it is a sacrifice Wolff will never ask of me."

"Life will ask it of you—not even Wolff can alter the laws of life. The day may come when Circumstance will say to you that you must choose. And what then?"

Nora was silent. Then she lifted her head.

"Then, mother, I should have to choose. It is true—my love is strongest in me."

Mrs. Ingestre sank back among her pillows.

"God help you, dear!" she said under her breath.

Nora waited a moment. There was something more that she had to tell—the story of a letter written in a fervour of self-sacrifice, and of another letter written two weeks later, a pitiful letter containing a confession and a plea for forgiveness. But she recognised the signs of exhaustion, and crept softly back to the fire. After all, it would do another day. Another day! That most pitiful of all excuses had haunted her from the moment that she had felt Wolff von Arnim's arms about her, and she was honest enough to despise it and herself. But she was afraid. She was convinced that Wolff would not understand either her old friendship with Robert Arnold or her subsequent folly in accepting a man she did not love. Nor could she explain, for the one explanation possible was the sacred secret of Hildegarde's heart. She was equally convinced that her mother would disapprove of her silence and demand that she should deal honestly with the man she was to marry. She knew that her mother would be right, and indeed she meant to tell the truth—but not now. The new happiness was too insecure. And then, the episode, foolish and even disloyal as it had been, was closed and done with. Robert Arnold had obviously accepted her final acknowledgment of the truth, and had silently gone his way. He had not answered either letter, and probably they would not meet again, or, at any rate, not until the wound had healed and been forgotten. Was it not wiser, therefore, to keep silence also—for the present? Thus Nora argued with her own conscience, and, torn between a natural rectitude and a headstrong love, came to no conclusion, but let the matter drift until that well-known "some time" which, had she been wiser, she would have recognised as an equivalent for "never."

But at least the great battle for her liberty had been fought and won. An invitation was promptly sent to Karlsburg and as promptly accepted, and the day dawned which was to see Wolff's triumphal entry into the enemy's stronghold. Even Miles, though the permission to "keep out of the way" would have been willingly granted him as far as Nora was concerned, insisted on making his future brother-in-law's arrival an excuse for returning on leave.

"The sooner I get the blow over the better," he said, and gratuitously undertook to accompany Nora and her father to the station when the unloved guest was expected.

There were more people on the platform than was usual at that time of the day. From one source and another, Delford had got to know all about Nora's engagement; and though, from the station-master's "Well, I call it a real downright shame that a pretty girl should throw herself away on one of them there Proosians!" to Mrs. Clerk's "Dear me, how dreadful!" the chorus of disapproval had been rung on every possible change, still, a good many of the disapprovers had found it necessary to be present at the arrival of the London express. Nora herself noticed nothing unusual. She was overwhelmed by a sense of unreality which made the incidents of the last months seem like pictures from a confused dream. Everything had happened so swiftly. Love, despair, and happiness had trodden on each other's heels; and in the same moment that she had grasped her happiness with both hands, she had been swept away, back into the old surroundings where that happiness had no place. And now that it was coming to her, seeking her out, as it were, in the enemy's territory, she could hardly be sure whether it were really true, whether Wolff himself were not some dream-figure who had won her in another and less everyday existence.

In the midst of her bewildered thoughts the express steamed into the little station, and the next minute Wolff had become a living, breathing reality, who swept down upon her and kissed her, regardless of all the Delfordites in the world. When he gave her time and opportunity to look at him, she felt that he, too, had undergone a change, and had taken on something of his surroundings. She would hardly have recognised him in the plain tweed suit and bowler hat. Neither became him so well as his uniform—to tell the truth, neither fitted him with any great exactitude, and it was all too evident that the suit was "ready-made." But the face, strong and tanned, flushed now with his joy at seeing her, was the same. It carried her memory back to that wonderful hour when he had lifted her out of the deepest despair to an intoxicating happiness, and she, too, forgot the Delfordites and the disapproving glances of her relations, and clung to him in a transport of delight.

"My little Nora!" he said, "the weeks have been months!"

"I am not sure that they have not been years!" she cried, laughing. And then she remembered her father and brother, and hastened to perform the ceremony of introduction. The three men shook hands, the Rev. John with solemnity, Miles with a covert sneer and a glance which took in every detail of the newcomer's person. Either the solemnity or the sneer worked depressingly on Wolff's spirits. He grew suddenly quiet and grave, though his eyes, when they met Nora's, flashed

with a smothered happiness which she read and understood.

But the drive home in the narrow confines of the Delford brougham remained in Nora's memory as one of the most painful in her experience. The Rev. John persisted in his funereal solemnity, and talked of the weather, the journey, and the crops, very much as though he were trying to take their minds off the unpleasant circumstances which had brought them together. As to Miles, he sat in the far corner with his hands in his pockets and stared out of the window—when he was not staring the new-comer out of countenance.

Poor Nora! Never before had she greeted the appearance of the monument and the ugly church steeple with so much thankfulness.

"We are nearly there now," she said, looking up into Wolff's face. "Mother has been so impatient to see you."

Her eyes were full of a shamed, indignant apology, to which Wolff's quiet smile seemed to answer:

"What do I care for them? I would carry you off if there were forty of them, all forty times as disagreeable!" And he pressed her hand defiantly under the rugs.

At length the vicarage was reached. The queer, old-fashioned trunk was dragged down from its perch, and five minutes later Wolff was standing in the dimly lit drawing-room. Mrs. Ingestre had heard their coming, and came slowly and painfully forward. Her hands were outstretched, and Wolff took them, gravely bowing, and kissed them. Nora saw a curious, half-horrified expression pass over her father's face, and Miles smothered a laugh. She felt in that moment as though she could have killed them both, and then fled with Wolff anywhere, so long as she could get away from their stifling atmosphere of self-satisfaction and petty prejudices.

Her mother's voice was the first to break the silence.

"My dear Wolff," Mrs. Ingestre said gently, "how glad I am that you have really come at last!"

The simple words, with their quietly emphasised acceptance of him as a relation, acted like a balm on poor Nora's wounded spirits. She saw, too, that Wolff's face had relaxed.

"You make me very happy," he said. "I feel for the first time that Nora and I really belong to one another—since I have seen you, and you have welcomed me."

A strange sound came from the Rev. John's direction, which might have been a cough or a groan of disapproval. Mrs. Ingestre appeared to notice nothing. She took Wolff's arm, and, leaning on him as though for support, led him closer to the light.

"You must forgive me," she said. "Remember that I am an old woman and that old women have their cranks. One of mine is that I do not like to be kept waiting. And I have been kept waiting so long to see the face of this wonderful German that I forgot that in all politeness I should be studying you out of the corners of my eyes. Nora has of course described you—but then, Nora is prejudiced."

At this point the Rev. John's cough became consumptive in its hollow persistency, and he was heard to murmur something to the effect that Herr von Arnim would no doubt like to be shown to his room. Herr von Arnim appeared to be afflicted with deafness. He looked down at Mrs. Ingestre, meeting her frank inspection with steady, laughing eyes.

"I am not anything to look at—especially in these clothes," he said naïvely. "I don't think even Nora could have said that I was handsome. So you must not judge by appearances. After a time you will know what I really am, and I hope you will like me."

"If I can trust Nora's description I do that already," Mrs. Ingestre answered, "but, more than Nora, more than experience, I trust my own eyes. And I think"—she paused, and the smile that crept about her lips lit up her whole face, and made it almost young and very beautiful—"I think I shall be happy to give my Nora to you, Wolff."

The cough and its owner had departed in despair. Miles, finding himself ignored, skulked sulkily in the passage. Wolff bent and kissed the white, delicate hand that still clasped his own.

"I thank you!" he said simply.

This time there were neither exclamatory eyebrows nor smothered giggles, and Nora, forgetting that they had ever been, saw in Wolff's action the seal and charter of her happiness.

## CHAPTER XII

### NORA FORSAKES HER COUNTRY

Nora believed in unalloyed happiness. Any one with more experience would have known that

unalloyed happiness, as such, does not exist. The moment when we feel ourselves supremely happy is the moment when we are most exposed to the rude shocks of fortune. We know it, and consequently our bliss is immediately overshadowed with the knowledge of its short duration.

When Mrs. Ingestre and Wolff had stood together hand in hand, as though in solemn compact of friendship and affection, Nora's heart had filled to overflowing; but already that same evening a dozen trifles, a dozen pin-pricks, came to prove to her that the storms and misadventures of the last weeks were by no means at an end. Her father who, to do him justice, never accused a fellow-creature until he was proved guilty, was none the less on the lookout for proofs of Wolff's unsuitability, and continued distressed and grave. If at any time the conversation became in the least animated, or showed a tendency to the mildest form of hilarity, he was at once on the spot with some painfully repressing commonplace. It was as though he were constantly murmuring, "Children, remember what has happened! This is not an occasion for unseemly mirth!" and in spite of all efforts the conversation drifted into a channel which would have been considered unnecessarily depressing at a funeral.

Miles aided and abetted his father after his own fashion. His asides to Nora were marked by pungent humour and sarcasm. Inquiries after Wolff's tailor, and whether it was the fashion in Germany to wear one's tie at "that angle," were varied with shocked appeals that "that fellow might be told to put his knife and fork together when he had finished eating, and not leave it sprawling about his plate like a yokel!"

Nora never retorted. She felt the uselessness of explaining that the Germans were different, but not on that account worse; but she felt like an enraged tigress who sees her cub attacked by brutal, clumsy hands. She did not see that Wolff, unaccustomed to such things, had struggled in vain with a refractory evening tie, nor that the cut of his coat was scarcely of the latest fashion. She saw first and foremost that he was a man and a gentleman, and her love and respect for him kindled in the same measure that her love for her father and brother diminished. There were moments during Wolff's fortnight visit when she came to hate both, so intensely did she resent their attitude towards her future husband. The Rev. John, thanks to Mrs. Ingestre, remained formal and polite to Wolff's face. Behind his back he displayed an all-damning charity.

"Of course, we must not judge a foreigner by our standards," he would say pathetically, "and I daresay he is well-meaning, but I wish, my poor child——"

He would then break off, and look out of the window with an expression full of the most moving pity and regret.

Miles, fortified with the knowledge of exams. passed and a dawning manhood, was not so reserved in his opinions.

"I can't think what you see in him, Nora!" he once said condescendingly. "He is a regular out-and-out German, and his hat-doffing and hand-kissing make me sick. I wish he would take himself and his beastly polish back to his own country."

Whereby it will be seen that "beastly polish" was not one of Miles Ingestre's weaknesses.

On the whole, Wolff more than held his own. Although unaffected and modest as far as his own person was concerned, he was much too deeply imbued with the traditional conception of his social position to feel anything but calm amusement at the ungraciousness of his two hosts. As an officer in the King's army, and as a scion of an old and noble race, he felt himself secure against contempt even in a foreign country where such things did not count. For him they counted everywhere—they upheld him and lent him an imperturbable *savoir faire* where another man would have shown temper or resentment. Nevertheless, the fortnight was not a very happy one. The unspoken knowledge that Wolff was not "approved of" weighed upon Nora and himself as a fact which both recognised but felt wiser to ignore. They were ill at ease even when alone—Nora because she was ashamed of her own people, Wolff because he knew she was ashamed, and could do nothing to help her. Consequently they were happiest when together with Mrs. Ingestre. Her grace of manner and openly expressed affection for her future son-in-law lifted the shadow between them, and the hours spent at her side counted amongst the most unclouded.

There were constant "visits" during Wolff's stay. From the inevitable Mrs. Clerk, who, in spite of strong disapproval, could not refrain from gushing over the German Baron to the Manor people, who were ponderously and haughtily critical, the whole of Delford came up for the inspection. Of course, it was a "formal" inspection. "Informal inspections" had been held in church, and when Wolff had cantered through Delford on a borrowed horse, which Miles had hopefully but mistakenly prophesied would "buck him over the first hedge." On the latter occasion it is possible that more than one feminine heart was stirred to unacknowledged admiration for the bronzed face and splendid figure, and even Miles was compelled to the sulky

confession that "the fellow could ride."

Thus the days passed, and, except in one long interview with the Rev. John, Wolff and Nora's marriage was treated as a tabooed subject. That interview, revealing as it did not very brilliant financial prospects, reduced the rev. gentleman to even deeper depression, and the hope of a definite settlement seemed all too far off. It was then that Mrs. Ingestre threw in the casting vote of her influence. A few days before Wolff's departure she called him to her, and the two were alone together for a long hour. In that hour Wolff learnt to know more of Mrs. Ingestre's life and character than Nora had done in all the years at her mother's side. In her desire to help her daughter to happiness, all other considerations were forgotten, and Mrs. Ingestre revealed unconsciously to Wolff's more experienced eyes a profound, if resigned, grief over her own life, stifled and clogged as it had been in her husband's atmosphere. In the quiet room her voice sounded peculiarly earnest, almost impressive.

"I need not tell you, my dear Wolff," she said, "that my husband is against your marriage with Nora. You must know that already. He has other ideas of happiness and suitability, and I can scarcely blame him, since they were once mine. Like him, I once saw in long acquaintance, similarity in ideas, and, of course, nationality, a certain wealth and position, the best foundations for a happy and successful life. Like him, I would probably have thought that you were not rich enough to marry, that you had not known each other long enough, that the difference of nationality and upbringing would be too great a stumbling-block. I have learnt since those days to think differently. The circumstances make little difference either way, so long as a great love is there. And, after all, what is a great love?" For the first time her tone was tinged with a faint cynicism. "Who can dare to call their love really great until they are on their deathbeds? We cannot be sure of our love, whether the object be well known to us or not, until it has been tried by the fires of years and custom. Custom is the hardest trial of all, and that is why I am glad rather than sorry that you and Nora know each other so little. It is because you know each other so little that you are in love, for being in love is simply the charm of standing before the closed, mysterious door of another's personality, and knocking for it to open. When the door opens, you will cease to be in love, but I believe that, because you are both worthy of it, you will find the all-enduring love waiting for you. At any rate, it seems to me the chances are as great for you as for those who, knowing each other too well, have never known the charm. Wolff, I am an old woman in suffering if not in years, and I think age and youth often join hands over the experience of middle life. Youth believes it is better to be truly happy for an hour and to suffer through all eternity rather than enjoy years of placid, passionless content. And that is what I have also come to believe. I would rather Nora enjoyed a brief but complete union with you than a lifetime of 'living together' with another man. Besides, I trust you; I believe you to be a good man, as I believe Nora to be a good woman, and I hope that in the afterwards you will learn to love each other. As to the question of nationality and wealth, they spell struggle and sacrifice for you both, Wolff. As a woman Nora will bring the greatest sacrifice, but I know that you will help her."

"With all my strength."

"And you will have patience?"

He looked at her wonderingly.

"Sometimes you will need it, Wolff. But Nora is brave and good. She will learn to love your country because she loves you. For my part—I am glad that she is leaving Delford far behind her."

Wolff made no answer. He felt that the words were an almost unconscious outburst, that unknowingly she had spoken of herself. After a moment she went on with a quiet smile:

"So, you see, I am on your side. So long as I am on your side, there is nothing for either of you to fear. If anything should happen——"

"I pray that I shall never give you cause to take your trust away from me!" Wolff broke in.

Mrs. Ingestre shook her head.

"I was not thinking of that possibility," she said. "I was thinking that if Nora stood alone—without me—the fight against her father's wishes might be harder. I know she would hold to you, but it would be at a bitter cost. That is why I wish for you to marry soon—as soon as possible."

Something in her tone affected Wolff painfully. He looked at her, and for the first time he saw that this woman was suffering intensely, silently, with a smile on her lips and unconquered life in her eyes.

"Mrs. Ingestre!" he exclaimed.

She took his hand and pressed it.

"I think you know," she said, "and if I tell you what I have withheld, and shall withhold, from

every living being, it is because I wish you to clearly understand my reasons. I cannot live very long, and before it is too late I want to see Nora in your care. Can you promise that my wish shall be granted?"

He made no effort to pity or express his grief. There was something masculine in her calm which held him silent, but in that moment his love for Nora strengthened because one woman had lifted her whole sex with her to the highest summit of his man's ideal. He lifted her hand reverently to his lips.

"God knows I promise willingly," he said.

Thus Wolff von Arnim went back to his own country, and in April, four months later, came again, but not alone. Frau von Arnim accompanied him, and Delford awoke from its lethargy to the thrilling, gossip-giving occasion of a wedding. The ugly church was made beautiful with all the flowers which Mrs. Ingestre's garden and the neighbouring town could provide, the village choir produced its best anthem with deafening, ear-rending enthusiasm, and every inhabitant turned out to gape at the "Baron" and the elegant woman who—it was scarcely to be believed!—was actually a German. In truth, Frau von Arnim's elegance and air of *grande dame* upset not only Delford's preconceived notions but the Rev. John's attitude as the condescending party in an obvious *mésalliance*. The "German woman" frightened him, and his position was rendered the more difficult by his wife, who chose to take a decided liking for this new guest and to treat her as a welcome relation. Altogether, on the day of the wedding the poor gentleman was fairly carried off his feet by the foreign invasion. Not only Frau von Arnim, but even the despised Wolff became a personage beside whom it was not easy to appear with dignity. The latter had discarded the ungainly efforts of the Karlsburg civilian tailor, and though the Delfordites, who, in spite of a strong anti-military spirit, had had secret hopes of being regaled with flying plumes and glittering epaulettes, were somewhat disappointed with his frock-coat, his height and the fact that he was "a real foreigner" successfully withdrew every particle of attention from the Rev. John's moving address.

In all the church there were perhaps only three people for whom the ceremony had any other significance than that of an interesting show, and none of them were listening to the Rev. John. Mrs. Ingestre was praying for the future in which she was doomed to have no share. Wolff and Nora thanked God for the present, which was theirs and which seemed but a foretaste of the future. Both had forgotten the trials and disappointments of the last four months, or if they thought of them at all it was as of obstacles triumphantly surmounted.

In Nora all that had grown hard and bitter softened into an all-embracing tenderness. Her love for her father and brother revived—even Delford and its inhabitants appeared to her in the beautiful light of farewell. She knew she was leaving everything, if not for ever, at least for ever as her home, and as she walked by her husband's side down the narrow churchyard path her heart throbbed with a sudden pain. After all, it was England she was leaving—and she was English no longer! Then she looked up at Wolff, and their eyes met, and the pain had died as though at the touch of some mysterious healing hand.

"How I love you!" she thought.

At the door of her old home Frau von Arnim was the first to greet her. Perhaps the elder woman's instinct had guessed the moment's pain, for she took Nora in her arms and kissed her with an unusual tenderness.

"We will try and make you happy in your new country," she whispered. "You must not be afraid."

But Nora was no longer afraid, and her eyes were bright with a fearless confidence in the future as she returned the embrace.

"I *am* happy!" she said. "I have everything that I care for in the world."

She ran quickly upstairs and changed into her simple travelling-dress. Mrs. Ingestre, she knew, was resting in her room, and the desire to be alone with her mother for a last moment was strong in Nora's heart. In her supreme happiness she did not forget those whom she loved; rather her love had strengthened, and towards her mother it was mingled with an endless gratitude. Yet when she crept into the little room she found it empty and silent. Mrs. Ingestre had gone back to her guests, and for a moment Nora stood looking about her, overwhelmed by the tide of tender memories from a past which already seemed so far off. The invalid's sofa, her own special chair where she had sat in those peaceful afternoons when they had been alone together, her mother's table—Nora drew closer. Something lying on the polished surface had attracted her attention. Hardly knowing why, she picked it up. It was a letter addressed to her at Karlsburg, and the handwriting was familiar. Nora did not stop to think. She tore the envelope open and read the

first few lines of the contents with the rapidity of indifference. Her thoughts were elsewhere, and the words and the writing had at first no meaning. And then suddenly, as though she had been roughly awakened from a dream, she understood what it was she held. It was from Robert Arnold, and it was a love-letter.

She read the first page over and over again. She felt stunned and sickened. Her mind refused to grasp what had happened.

"My darling," Robert had written two months before, from some far-off African village, "a miracle has happened! Your letter has come! It must have missed me at Aden, and had followed me from place to place until at last it has reached my hands. And all these months I have been thinking that you had no answer for me, or at the most the one I feared. Nora, need you ask me if I will take what you have to offer? I love you, dear, and I know my love will awaken yours and that I shall make you happy. My whole life shall thank you for the trust you have given me. I can hardly write for my joy, and the time that must elapse before I can see you seems intolerable. I cannot return for at least two or three months, as I have promised a friend to accompany him on an inland expedition, but when that is over I shall make full steam for home—or, rather, to Germany if you are still there. In the meantime, write to me, dearest. Even though weeks may pass before the letters reach me, yet the knowledge that they are there waiting will give me hope and courage. I am sending this letter to the coast by a native carrier. Heaven knows if it will ever reach you, but..."

Nora looked up, conscious that she was no longer alone. Wolff stood in the doorway, dressed for departure, his hands outstretched.

"Are you ready, *kleine Frau*?" he said. "We are all waiting for you——" He broke off, and took a quick step towards her. "Nora!" he exclaimed. "How pale you are! What is the matter?"

It seemed to her that a full minute must have elapsed before she brought her lips to move, but in reality she answered almost immediately:

"It is nothing—nothing whatever. I am quite ready—I will come now."

Outwardly pale and calm, she had lost all inner self-possession, and in a kind of frenzied fear was tearing the letter into a thousand pieces. She had no thought for the future; blindly and instinctively she was saving herself from the present.

Wolff watched her in puzzled silence. Then, when the last fragment fell to the ground, he came and took her hands.

"Nora, something *is* wrong. Did that letter trouble you? What was it?"

"No, no. If it is anything, it is just the thought of leaving them all. Surely you understand?"

Poor Nora! That "some day" when she had thought to tell him everything had become a "never," sealed and made irrevocable by a silence and a lie. Poor Wolff! He thought he understood. He put his arms tenderly about her.

"Yes, I understand. I know you have given up everything for my sake. But, oh, Nora, God helping us, we shall be so happy!"

He waited, and then, as she did not speak, went on gently:

"Can you bear to come now? Is your love big enough to give up all that is past, to start afresh—a new life with me in a new home, a new country? Is it too great a sacrifice to ask, Nora?"

His words acted like a strong charm. She thought they were prophetic, and her reckless despair changed into a more reckless happiness. She lifted her face to his, and her eyes were triumphant.

"It is no sacrifice," she said. "My love for you can perform miracles. It has made your people my people, your God my God, and it can wipe out the past—everything—and leave nothing in my life but you! Take me with you, Wolff. I am quite, quite ready!"

He led her proudly and happily from the room, and afterwards from the house that had been her home.

But, little as she knew it, no miracle had been performed in Nora's life.

END OF BOOK I

## BOOK II

### CHAPTER I

"My dear," said Frau von Seleneck, bustling into her husband's study, "is it true that the Arnims have arrived? I heard something about it yesterday from Clara, but she was not certain, and I want to know. Of course they ought to call first, but as one of the regiment, we don't need to stand on ceremony. Besides, I want to see his wife."

"And his flat, and his furniture, and his cook, and her dresses," Herr von Seleneck added, with a chuckle. "Yes; call by all means. They arrived some days ago, and have a flat in the Adler Strasse. You had better go this morning."

"I thought you had duty?"

"So I have." Kurt von Seleneck stretched himself, and his eyes twinkled. "You can make that my excuse for not accompanying you on your first visit. You don't need to pretend to me, after five years of married life, that you really want me to come with you, because you know you don't. Just think of the things you can talk about if I am not there! Just think how wretchedly *de trop* I should be between you two, and let me go—this time, at least."

"You would have Wolff to talk to," Frau von Seleneck said, trying to draw her round, rosy face into lines of disappointment. "You must have a lot to say to each other."

"Thank you!" her husband retorted, preparing to exchange his undress *Litewka* for the blue coat which a stolid orderly was holding in readiness. "Wolff and I will have opportunities enough, and the prospect of being sent away 'to talk' like children whilst you two women exchange confidences is too humiliating. Go alone, my dear."

Frau von Seleneck, having attained her object, proceeded to raise all sorts of objections.

"I think it is mean of you to desert me, Kurt," she said. "Frau von Arnim probably can't speak a word of German, and my English is as rusty as it can be. I haven't spoken it for years and years. We shall have to play Dumb Crambo or something, and I shall die of nervousness."

"I hope not," Seleneck said, who was now busy with the gloves she had laid out for him. "No doubt you are too modest, and your English only needs a little polish to reach perfection. At any rate, you can but try, and, as far as I know, Frau von Arnim can help things along with her German. She has been in Karlsburg ever since May, and ought to have picked up something of the language."

"Oh, if it comes to that, I dare say I shall manage quite well," said Frau von Seleneck, who was secretly very proud of her English, "but I wish she were *erne gute Deutsche*. I can't think why Wolff married an Englishwoman. All English people are dreadful. I had an English governess who frightened me to death. At meal times she used to keep up a fire of unpleasant criticism, and glare at me as though I were a sort of heathen monstrosity. 'Elsa, don't bolt your food! You eat like a wolf! Your manners would disgrace a bricklayer!' I simply hated her, and I hate all English people. They are so rude and stiff and *ungemtlich*. One sees that they despise everybody except themselves, and one wonders how they manage it."

Her husband laughed good-naturedly.

"I don't think they are as bad as you paint them," he said. "I believe some of them are quite decent fellows, and Frau von Arnim is, I know, charming. At any rate, do your best to be agreeable; there's a kind soul. I expect she will feel rather forlorn at first."

Frau von Seleneck bridled with indignation.

"Of course I shall be agreeable! If she doesn't freeze me, I shall do everything I can to make her feel she is one of us. At least——" she hesitated, "I suppose she is one of us, isn't she? Who was she before she married Wolff?"

"My dear, if you knew you wouldn't be much the wiser," Seleneck said, preparing for departure. "English people are different. I believe it is quite an honour to marry a rich tea-merchant—or a rich anybody, for that matter. As far as I know, Frau von Arnim was a parson's daughter, and quite good family. The fact that Wolff married her and has been able to stay in the Army is guarantee enough."

Elsa von Seleneck looked relieved.

"Of course!" she said. "How stupid of me! Well, I shall go and see what I can do to help her. I expect she is in frightful trouble with her servants. I know I am."

She accompanied her husband to the door of their flat, brushed an imaginary speck of dust off his uniform, kissed him and rushed to the window to wave him a last farewell as he rode off down the quiet street. Until eleven o'clock she busied herself with her household matters, then arrayed herself in her best clothes and set off on the proposed voyage of discovery.

The Adler Strasse lay at some considerable distance, and Frau von Seleneck was both hot

and exhausted by the time she reached the unpretentious little house where the Arnims had taken up their quarters. She had not made use of the trams, because if you start taking trams in Berlin you can spend a fortune, and she had no fortune to spend. Moreover, she was a rotund little person, with a dangerous tendency to stoutness, and exercise therefore was a good excuse for saving the pfennige. Certainly she had exercise enough before she reached the Arnims' flat. It was on the top floor, and even for Frau von Seleneck's taste, which was not that of a pampered millionaire, the stairs were unusually steep and narrow and smelly. From the tiny landing where the visitor sought room to wait patiently for the opening of the hall door, it was possible to make a close guess at the various dinners which were being prepared in all four flats. Boiled vegetables formed the staple odour, and as, according to the unwritten law which governs German flats, all the staircase windows were hermetically sealed, it was very noticeable indeed. Not that this troubled Frau von Seleneck in the least. What did trouble her was the obstinate silence which greeted her vigorous application of the electric bell. At last, after one exceptionally determined peal, the door was cautiously opened, and Frau von Seleneck found herself welcomed by a girl who stared at her with an amusing mixture of alarm and indignation, Frau von Seleneck's inner comment was to the point.

"Pretty servants are always a trouble," she thought. "This one will certainly be having love affairs with the Bursche. I shall warn Frau von Arnim at once."

Aloud she inquired if the *gnädige Frau* was at home. To her surprise, a deep flush mounted the "servant's" cheeks and dyed the white forehead to the roots of the somewhat disordered brown hair. The door was opened a fraction wider.

"I am the *gnädige Frau*," a low voice said shame-facedly, in a nervous, broken German. "My—my cook has gone out, and so——"

Frau von Seleneck held out both her hands.

"Why, of course!" she cried in English. "How stupid of me! I am terribly short-sighted, you know, or I should not make so silly a mistake. I am Frau von Seleneck—the wife of your husband's old comrade. I should have had the joy of meeting you in Karlsburg, but I was ill at the time—and better late than never, as you English say. I have come now to tell you "Willkommen in the Fatherland!"

Her English came in an almost unintelligible rush, but the tone was so warmhearted and friendly, that poor Nora, who believed she had brought everlasting disgrace upon herself and the whole family, was humbly thankful to open the drawing-room door and usher in her unexpected visitor.

"I don't know what you must think of me," she said, "but just at present we have only one servant, and she has gone out. It seems the tradespeople don't come for orders, and I am much too inexperienced, and know far too little German to go shopping alone."

In her unhappiness at having opened the door, she forgot to offer Frau von Seleneck a chair; but the latter, at heart only too thankful to find the freezing "Engländerin" in so human a fluster, took possession of the centre of the little sofa, and began the work of reassurance.

"That is nothing whatever in the world, dear Frau von Arnim," she said cheerfully. "I often open the door myself, and if anybody takes me for my cook, what does that make? It prove that the person does not belong to my circle, and if he does not belong to my circle it makes nothing what he thinks."

During this exposition of uncontrovertible logic she had been making a rapid mental catalogue of the furniture. Nora saw the wandering eyes, and her humiliation deepened.

"I am afraid the room is horribly untidy," she confessed, wondering if the time would ever come when she would be able to stop apologising and begin a normal conversation. "You see, we have only been in a few days, and I have not got everything in its place. I hope soon it will look a little better."

She spoke rather despondently, because she felt the cheap little suite of plush furniture gave no great hopes of "looking better," even with the most careful arrangement, and she was sure that the fact was obvious to all. Very much to her surprise, therefore, her visitor broke into a panegyric of praise.

"It is all charming!" she said, looking about her very much as though she were in a gallery of art-treasures. "I do not see how it could be better. And how good have you chose the colours! The chairs are almost the same tint as the paper, aren't they?—not quite, perhaps, but nearly. And the curtains are exquisite. How I envy you! When you come to see us, you will say, 'Ach! how is all old and shady!' and you will pity us long-married people."

"Perhaps you would like to see the other rooms?" Nora suggested, who had never mastered

the problem as to what one did with visitors who called at twelve o'clock in the morning. Frau von Seleneck expressed herself more than willing, and a close inspection was made of the five large-sized cupboards which served the Arnims as abode.

"Really, one can hardly know which is the most delightful," Frau von Seleneck declared at the end. "Everything is so tasty, as you English say—so bijou."

"A little stuffy, don't you think?" Nora said timidly. "I can never get enough air, and the stairs are sometimes quite—unpleasant. Didn't you notice it?"

"*Ach, was!*" Frau von Seleneck exclaimed. "You should smell ours when our down-below neighbours have their wash-day. Then you might complain. But one must not complain. It is the greatest mistake possible—and so ungrateful. Everything is so delightful, you know."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Nora said hesitatingly.

Frau von Seleneck gave a comfortable little laugh, and patted her on the shoulder.

"You don't think so, *Verehrteste*? You must do like I. Six days in the week I thank *dem lieben Gott* that my neighbours wash not, and the seventh I think of my sins. That way I can almost enjoy the smell. And after all, it is quite a little smell, and my sins are sometimes——" She spread out her arms to indicate an immeasurable immensity, and Nora laughed. Her visitor's good spirits were so infectious that she forgot her futile discussion with the cook, and the impenetrable stupidity of the Bursche, and began to believe that everything really was "delightful."

"I will think of your advice next time I want to grumble," she said, as they re-entered the drawing-room. "Perhaps it will help me over some bad moments."

Frau von Seleneck took her hand, and, to Nora's surprise, embraced her affectionately.

"That is why I am here," she said. "The others—the *Spitzen*, superior officers and wives, you know—you will have to visit first. But I thought I could help you. I am such an old soldier." She laughed again, and then became suddenly thoughtful. "Have you yet called upon the Mayos?" she asked.

"No," Nora answered abruptly.

"Then you must do so at once—they are important people, and Major von Mayo is your husband's direct superior. You know, at the beginning it is important that you should offend no one—one cannot be too particular."

"I met Frau von Mayo in Karlsburg," Nora said. "I did not like her—she was rude and ill-mannered."

Frau von Seleneck's eyes twinkled.

"She is always so," she said. "One gets accustomed."

"I do not think that I should 'get accustomed,'" Nora retorted, with heightened colour. "At any rate, I shall not call."

"You——" Frau von Seleneck gasped, and her eyes distended with unaffected horror. "*Aber, du lieber Gott im Himmel!*—you cannot mean what you say, you do not know——" she choked. "*Es ist unmöglich!*" she decided, as though addressing an unreasonable deity.

"I don't see why it is *unmöglich*," Nora said. "There is no purpose in calling on people whom I do not want to know. I told Wolff so."

"Ah, you have told your husband! And what did he say?"

Nora hesitated. She remembered now that Wolff had looked troubled, and the remembrance caused her a sudden uneasiness.

"He said I could do as I liked," she said slowly.

"Ah, the young husbands!" Frau von Seleneck threw up her hands. "What folly! It must not be. You must call on the Mayos—on everybody. You must not show that you hate or that you love. You must be the same to all—gracious, smiling—though you may want to scratch their eyes out. You must remember we are all comrades."

"Comrades! I do not want Frau von Mayo as a comrade!" Nora cried indignantly.

Frau von Seleneck bent forward, and her voice sank to a mysterious whisper.

"Nor do any of us. I tell you in secret—she is a hateful person. But we must not let her see—it is our duty to pretend."

"Why?" Nora demanded uncompromisingly.

"For our husbands' sake—it does not do to have ill-feeling between the wives. Then the husbands quarrel, and there must be no ill-feeling between comrades."

Nora shook her head.

"I'm afraid I'm no good at pretending," she said.

"But you will try—for your good Wolff's sake? See, I will help you—if you will let me."

Nora took the outstretched hand. Her moment's anger had gone—dispersed by the simple

appeal "for Wolff's sake."

"You are very good to me," she said gratefully, "and I will try and do what is right. Everything is so new and strange to me."

"I know, I know. But you will see—all will go so smooth—so smooth. One day I will go with you to the Mayos. I have my little English, and that will make it easier. My poor English!" She gave another of her comfortable chuckles. "He is so very bad."

"Oh, not at all!" Nora hastened to reassure her politely. "It is really quite good—considering. I can understand everything you say."

There was a rather sudden silence, and to her alarm Nora observed that her visitor's pink cheeks had turned a bright scarlet, and that there was a look of almost childish disappointment in the large brown eyes. "What have I done?" Nora thought, and then, before she had time to fathom the mystery, the good-natured little woman had recovered her equanimity as suddenly as she had lost it.

"You and I must be great friends," she said. "Our husbands are so—great friends, and then, of course, you belong to the regiment—at least"—she corrected herself hastily, and almost apologetically—"your husband is on the Staff now, and will make a brilliant career, whilst my poor *Mann* has only a year's *Kommando*. Still, you *did* belong to the regiment, did you not? And that always makes a bond."

"Of course," Nora said. She was a little overwhelmed by the respect which this vastly older and wiser personage displayed towards her, and for the first time she realised that she had married a man on whom the military world already cast eyes of interest and envy. "I should only be too grateful for your friendship," she went on. "I know no one here, and Berlin is so big and strange to me. When Wolff is on duty I feel quite lost."

"And a leetle *Heimweh*?" Frau von Seleneck suggested quickly. "I know not what the word is in English, but it is a terrible pain. I have it here"—she put her hand to her heart—"every year, once for two months, when Kurt is in the manoeuvres, and I weep—I weep whole buckets full."

Nora started.

"Two months!" she said, horror-struck. "And will Wolff be away all that time?"

"*Aber natürlich, liebes Kind*! Even your Wolff will not be excused again. The Emperor has no heart for the poor wives. But you must not complain. You must laugh and be happy—at any rate, until your husband has gone. I always send mine away with a big smile, and tell him I am glad to be rid of him. Afterwards I weep. It is a great comfort to weep, but men like not tears. It makes them uncomfortable, and besides, one must not make their duty harder than it is."

"Of course not," Nora said bravely. "I shall do all I can to help him. And one can write lots of letters, can't one?"

"Every day, and twice a day," declared her visitor cheerily, as she arose. "Ach, you will be a good soldier's wife soon. And now I must go and see that my silly Bertha has not put all the salt-box in the soup. But if you will let me I will come again, and bring my Kurt with me. He was dying to come this time, but I would have none of him. Men are such a nuisance, *nicht wahr*! And then you must come and see us, and we will talk German together, and you shall know all my friends, and we will help each other like *gute Kameraden*."

A warm, hurried embrace, and plump, smiling-faced Frau von Seleneck was out of the room and on the tiny landing. A last pressure of the hand, a hearty "*Aufwiedersehen!*" and she had disappeared into a foggy atmosphere of pea-soup and Sauerkraut.

Nora went back into the disordered little drawing-room, and set to work with a new will. The spirit of cheery content and selflessness had been left sitting on the sofa, and it seemed to chuckle in a peculiar, fat, comfortable way as Nora pushed the chairs backwards and forwards in the vain attempt to induce an air of elegance.

"Even if she does admire the furniture, and think the flat perfection, she has a good, kind heart," Nora thought. "I am glad we are going to be friends."

She began to hum to herself, and when in an unusually untidy corner she found a pair of Wolff's *dritte Garnitur* gloves, she picked them up and kissed them. There was so much sunlight and love in her heart that smells and stuffiness and ugly furniture were forgotten, and she triumphed in the knowledge that she was, without exception, the happiest woman in the world.

## CHAPTER II
### —AND THE NEW LIFE

Nora sank with a triumphant sigh into her favourite arm-chair by the window. The much-dreaded visit to the Mayos was an accomplished fact, the day's household work at an end, and for a breathing-space she was at liberty to enjoy the luxury of an unobserved idleness. Dusk had set in, and dusk is the time of memories and dreams. And this evening Nora recalled the near past. She could not have explained why of late her thoughts reverted so constantly to the glowing period which had stood, as it were, beyond the first entry of her marriage and divided it from the dull grey of everyday life. The glorious month in the Black Forest, the visit to Karlsburg, the princely reception by her husband's old regiment, the military serenades, the military visits, the endless flood of bouquets from *Kameraden* the wild enthusiasm of poor little Fräulein Müller, who felt as though "it were my own wedding-day, you know, *liebes Kind*," and behaved as though such were really the case, the happy hours with Hildegarde and her mother—all this awoke in Nora's memory like some brilliant, intoxicating dream in whose reality she could scarcely believe. Then had come the house-hunting—or, rather, flat-hunting in the stifling heat of a Berlin July, and at last this—the slow settling down to her new life.

Nora sighed. She was feeling very tired and possibly slightly depressed. In truth, she was very often depressed in that hour which divided the close of her day's duties and Wolff's return, and sometimes there was even a touch of irritability in her depression. The constant round of "teas," the constant meeting of the same people, the constant repetitions, the unfailing discussions on *Dienst* and *Dienstangelegenheiten* wearied her to exasperation. Some of the women she liked, some she tolerated, some she hated; but, hated or loved or tolerated, these women formed her "circle," from which there was no possible escape. On the whole, she bore the burden of their good-natured dullness with apparent equanimity, so that Frau von Seleneck had told her, with the satisfaction of a successful monitor, that she was really "one of them." But there were also moments when weariness overcame her determined courage, and only the rallying-cry "For Wolff's sake" could bring light to her eyes. They were for the most part lonely moments, when she wandered about the tiny flat seeking some occupation which would help to pass the time till Wolff's return, or when *Kriegspiel* carried him away in the evenings and left her to solitude, a vague home-sickness—and fear. For fear had not been altogether banished from Nora's life, though she held it under with a firm hand. It haunted her now as she sat there watching the lights spring up in the windows opposite; it asked her what had happened, and what might still happen; it reminded her of the man she had deceived. No, not deceived. After all, she had offered her life, not her love, to Robert Arnold, because he had needed her, and because she in her turn had needed him as a barrier between herself and the man she really loved. When the barrier had proved useless she had flung it aside, and she knew that if she could live over again that hour when Wolff von Arnim had come to her with love and happiness in his hands, she would not act otherwise than she had done. And to Robert Arnold she had offered the one possible atonement—she had told him the truth. He had not answered her, and she had tried to put him out of her life, regretfully and remorsefully, as a friend whom she had wronged beyond forgiveness. Nevertheless, the power to forget had not been granted her. Memory, like some old mythological Fury seeking an expiatory sacrifice, haunted her and would haunt her, as she knew, until such time as the sacrifice was paid. And the sacrifice was a confession to her husband—an impossibility, since her lips were sealed by a lie and by the fear of losing that which was most precious to her—his love.

"But there shall be no more secrets in my life," she thought as she heard his step on the stairs outside, and perhaps at the bottom of her heart there lurked a superstitious hope that Nemesis had heard her promise and accepted it as an atonement. The next minute she was in her husband's arms, and Nemesis, conscience, Robert Arnold, and all the petty trials of the day were forgotten, overwhelmed by a passionate joy which filled her heart and the dusky room with sunshine.

"Why, Nora!" he exclaimed. "You are like a little hobgoblin, springing at one out of the shadows. What have you been doing all alone in the dark?"

"Dreaming—and waiting for you," she answered gaily. "Wait a moment till I have lit the lamp. I had forgotten that weary warriors do not care for the dim religious light which goes with dreaming."

He sank down into his chair with a tired sigh of contentment and watched her as she busied about the room, putting away his gloves and the officer's cap which he had thrown upon the table. There was no trace of depression in her face, nor, indeed, in her heart—only an almost childish happiness, and gradually the lines of worry and exhaustion faded from about the man's

strong mouth.

"How good it is to come home, Nora!" he said under his breath. "When I think of how I used to feel after a long day's work—why, I can't imagine how I existed."

"Do I make all the difference?"

"All the difference, my little wife."

She came and kissed him, and then stood looking down into his face with tender concern.

"You look so tired. Has anything been worrying you?"

"No, nothing—only the head-work is rather a strain. One has to give mind and soul to it; there is no slacking possible, even if one were inclined that way."

"Which you are not, you terrible man of iron and blood! Sometimes I am quite jealous of your work: I believe you love it more than you do me."

"It is my duty," he answered gravely. And then, after a moment, he added in a lighter tone, "By the way, an old friend of yours has arrived in Berlin."

Nora started.

"Who?"

"Bauer!"

She was conscious of a sensation of relief as reasonless as it was acute. Of what had she been afraid? She herself could not have told.

"I used to look upon that man as my evil genius," she said gaily, "but now I think he must have been sent as an angel in disguise. If it had not been for him I should not have known you loved me—do you remember—that day, in the forest?"

"I am never likely to forget," he answered, with a sudden movement of pain. "When I think what might have happened to you——"

"You mustn't think. Nothing *did* happen to me—or only something nice. But now you must listen to my news. Imagine what I have done to-day?"

"Nora, is that fair? Do you really expect my exhausted brains to tackle a problem like that!"

"Don't be rude! Think—I have called on the whole family Mayo, and been so polite and amiable that her ladyship only found it in her heart to be rude once. What have you to say to that?"

"What have I to say?" He took her hand and kissed it. "Thank you, dear."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Why, Wolff, does it mean so much to you?"

"Yes, a good deal. You see—one gets a bad name if one neglects certain people."

"Then why didn't you insist?"

He hesitated, avoiding her eyes.

"I didn't want to bother you more than I could help. Sometimes I am afraid it must be very hard on you, little woman."

Intuitively she guessed his thoughts, and without a word she gathered up some sheets of closely written notepaper lying on the table and thrust them into his hands.

"There, read that, you extremely foolish husband of mine!" she cried triumphantly. "I have been writing home, so you can judge for yourself."

He obeyed, and she stood watching him, knowing that he could but be satisfied. Indeed, her letters home were full of her happiness and of Wolff—the two things were synonymous—and if she did not mention that their home was small and stuffy, that she did most of the household work herself, and that a strict, painful economy watched over every item of their daily life, it was partly because she told herself that these details played no part in her estimation and partly because she shrank instinctively from the criticism which she knew would inevitably result. She gave, instead, glowing descriptions of the dinner-parties, of the whist-parties, even of the four-hour tea-parties with their unbroken conversational circle of *Dienstangelegenheiten* and "*Dienst-mädchen*." And in all this there was no hypocrisy. Her momentary depression and distaste were sub-conscious; she did not recognise them as such. She called them "moods," which vanished like mists in the sunshine of her husband's presence.

"Well?" she demanded, as he put the letters aside.

He shook his finger at her.

"Frauchen, Frauchen!" he said, laughing, "I am afraid you are what English people would call a humbug. From this epistle one would really imagine that Frau von Seleneck had received you in a palace, and that you had associated with all the *belles esprits* in Berlin, instead of—well, I imagine something very different. If I remember rightly, on that particular evening I found a very pale-faced wife waiting for me, with a bad headache and an apologetic description of an

afternoon spent in an overheated cupboard, with six other unhappy sufferers. And then you sit down and write that you enjoyed yourself immensely. Oh, Nora, Nora!"

"I *did* enjoy myself!" Nora affirmed, perching herself on the arm of her chair. "You know very well that the anticipation of happiness is almost as good as the thing itself, and every time that I felt I was going to suffocate I thought of the evening we were to spend together afterwards, and felt as happy as I have described myself. After all, everything helps to pass the time till we are together again."

He put his arm about her and was silent a moment, gazing thoughtfully before him. Then he looked up at her.

"It strikes me sometimes what a poor life I have to offer you, Nora," he said abruptly. "I don't think I would have noticed it so much, had I not seen your home. Poverty is such a relative conception. There are hundreds of officers' wives who are no better off than you, and who think themselves comfortably situated. But your father talked of poverty, and lived—for our ideas—like a lord. When I compare things I feel as though I had wronged you, and tempted you into a life of sacrifice to which you were never born."

Nora bent her head and kissed him.

"You are a very foolish fellow!" she said. "If you were not so filled with fortifications and tactics, you would know quite well that I would rather live in a rabbit-hutch with my husband, than in a palace with a prince."

Arnim laughed, and it was obvious that her words had lifted a very real burden from his mind.

"I'm afraid you would never get your husband into a rabbit-hutch," he said, with a self-satisfied glance at his own long, powerful limbs. "Still, it is a comfort to know that you would be ready to make the attempt. I think, though, if your people knew, and were not blinded by a certain deceitful young person, they would feel very differently. I think they would have a good many disagreeable things to say on the subject of your German home. Don't you?"

"No, I don't!" said Nora, privately determined that they should never have the chance. "I think they would be very glad to see for themselves how happy I am."

Wolff drew a letter from the pocket of his *Litewka*, and handed it to her.

"In that case there seems every likelihood of them enjoying that spectacle in the near future," he said. "I had this letter from your father by the evening post. Read it and see what you think."

Nora's beaming face clouded over somewhat. Letters from her father were always a mixed pleasure, and Wolff's words had warned her that this particular one contained something more than the usual condensed sermon. Her supposition was correct. After a long-winded preamble, the Rev. John plunged into the matter which was really on his mind. It appeared that Miles, having broken down under the strain of his military duties, had been granted a few months' leave, and it was proposed that he should spend the time abroad—for the benefit of his education. And whither was it more natural that he should go than to his own dear sister?

"You can imagine," the Rev. John had written, "that apart from the fact that we shall miss our boy terribly, the expense of the undertaking weighs heavily upon our minds. I am prepared, however, to make every possible sacrifice in order that he should obtain his wish, and am anxious to know if you could help me. Being on the spot, you will know best where and at what cost he could remain during his stay in your fine capital and, as one of the family, I feel sure that we shall be able to trust him to your care and surveillance. I should be most grateful, my dear Wolff, if you would give me your reply as soon as possible, as Miles is most eager to join you, and my wife, whose health, I regret to say, is far from satisfactory, feels that it would be good for her to be able to enjoy perfect quiet."

Nora put the letter down. It was the first time that the Rev. John had ever spoken of his son-in-law as "My dear Wolff" or admitted that he was "one of the family," and Nora felt vaguely ashamed—so much so, that she did not meet her husband's eyes, but sat twisting the carefully written epistle into a torn screw, as though she would have preferred to throw it in the fire, but was restrained by a sense of respect.

"I have certainly overdone it with my descriptions," she admitted frankly. "Miles is getting bored at home, and imagines that we can procure a good time for him here. What are you going to do, Wolff?"

"I think there is only one thing for us to do," Wolff answered, with a somewhat grim smile, "and that is—our duty. I shall write to your father and invite Miles to stay with us, so long as he is in Berlin."

Nora got up. The movement was abrupt enough to suggest a sudden disquiet amounting to

actual fear, and her face had become crimson.

"Wouldn't you like it, Nora?" her husband asked. He was watching her keenly, and his gaze seemed to increase her uneasiness.

"Miles is so young—a mere boy," she stammered. "We can't tell what trouble he will get into. And besides, where have we to put him? We have no room?"

"There is the *Fremdenzimmer*," Wolff answered quietly; "and as to your other objection, I can only say that at his age I was already lieutenant, and free to govern my own life as I chose."

"One can't compare you with Miles," Nora interposed. "I think your people must have been able to trust you when you were in the cradle."

Wolff laughed, but the gravity in his eyes remained unchanged. He got up, and put his hands on Nora's shoulders.

"You do not want your brother to come," he said. "Is it not a little because you are ashamed—of the way we live?"

Nora met his eyes steadily, but for a moment she was silent, deep in her own thoughts. She was trying to find out exactly why a weight had fallen upon her mind, why the atmosphere in the little room had become close and stifling. Was it really shame, or was it something else—a foreboding of resulting evil, too vague to be defined in words?

"I want an answer, Nora," Wolff continued firmly. "The thought that you might be hiding the truth from your people out of loyalty towards me is intensely painful. Heaven knows, I would bring every possible sacrifice——"

"Hush!" Nora interrupted, and there was a curious note of sternness in her young voice. "I hate to hear you talk like that. It sounds as though *I* had brought some sacrifice, or had lowered myself to become your wife. I married you, Wolff, because I loved you, and because I knew that you were the only man with whom I could be happy. You have given me everything my most sanguine hopes could ask of life. That is the truth. What more can I say?"

He bent and kissed her.

"Thank you, dear," he said. "Then I may write to your father?"

"Yes—of course. I shall miss our quiet evenings alone, Wolff; but if you think it right——"

"I think there is nothing else for us to do," her husband answered. "After all, I do not expect it will be for long. We must not be selfish, dearest."

Nora smiled cheerfully; but for the first time in her married life the cheerfulness was forced. She could not shake off the feeling that a change had come, and one which was to bring no good with it.

## CHAPTER III
### A MEETING

Frau von Seleneck was engaged with her toilet before the looking-glass, and Nora, seated in the place of honour on the sofa, watched her with a critical interest. Hitherto she had not troubled herself much with the dowdiness or the smartness of her friends' apparel; she had accepted the general principle that "those sort of things did not matter so long as everybody knew who you were"; but something or other had occurred of late to change her attitude—a something which she had successfully avoided analysing. Only when Frau von Seleneck drew on her white silk mittens, Nora found herself wondering what Miles would think of her and, indeed, of everything. Not that Miles's opinion was of the slightest importance, but the possibility of criticism roused her to criticise; she was beginning to consider her surroundings without the aid of love-tinted glasses, and the results, if hitherto painless, were somewhat disconcerting.

"Now I am really ready!" Elsa von Seleneck declared, considering her bemittened hands. "How do you like my dress, Nora?" She lifted the ends of her mouse-coloured evening cloak and displayed herself with complacency. "No one would believe I had had it three years. Frau von Schilling said she thought it was quite a marvel. But you English have such good taste—I should like to know what you think."

Nora took a deep breath, and then, having seen the round, good-natured face turn to her with an expression of almost wistful appeal, plunged.

"I think it is a marvel, too," she said slowly. "I am so glad. You know, the first year I had it it was cream, the second year mauve, the third year black. Such a beautiful black, too! Of course, the fashion——" she looked at the puff sleeves regretfully—"they are rather out of date, are they

not?"

"That doesn't matter," Nora assured her. "The fashions are anyhow so ugly——" she was going to add "here," but stopped in time.

Frau von Seleneck laughed her comfortable laugh. It was one of her virtues that she never gave or suspected offence.

"Quite right, Norachen. How wonderfully sensible and practical you English are—at least, I should not say 'You English,' for you are a good German now, my dear!" It was evident that she had intended the remark as a compliment, and Nora was annoyed with herself for her own rather grim silence. "But there!" her friend went on with a sudden gust of energy, "here I stand and chatter, and it is getting so late! If there is one thing Her Excellency dislikes it is unpunctuality, and at this rate we are certain to miss the tram. Now, isn't that annoying! Bertha has hidden my goloshes again!"

In response to a heated summons, the little maid-of-all-work made her appearance, and after a long scramble around the hall hatstand the required articles were discovered and donned.

"Now I am *really* ready!" Frau von Seleneck declared for the twentieth time, and to confirm the statement proceeded to lead the way downstairs. Nora followed resignedly. She knew that it was raining, and she knew also that the very idea of taking a cab would be crushed instantly as a heinous extravagance, so she gathered up the frail skirt of her chiffon dress and prepared for the worst with a humorous despair.

Fortunately, though they indeed missed the tram, the road to Her Excellency Frau von Gersdorf's flat was not a long one, and only Nora's temper suffered in the transit. And even that circumstance passed unnoticed. Frau von Seleneck had walked very fast, and by the time they had mounted the flight of stone stairs leading to their destination she was hopelessly out of breath and in no mood to notice Nora's ruffled condition.

"Ah, but it is good to be arrived!" she sighed in English as she yielded her cloak to the attendant housemaid. "Now, my dear!"

The "now, my dear" was uttered in an awe-struck tone which suggested a solemnal entry into the Imperial Presence, and Nora, following her lead towards the drawing-room, experienced the bliss of a short-lived hope. She knew that it was a great honour to be invited to "Her Excellency's Evenings"; was it not possible that they might be different to the other "evenings" which she knew so well? Was it not possible that she was to see new faces and learn to know a brilliant world which she could show to Miles without—— She did not finish the thought, and indeed the hope had died at birth.

The door was thrown open, and she found herself in a small library, which appeared to form a kind of backwater for the two adjoining and equally over-crowded rooms. Nora sighed. There was no one in that moving stream whom she had not met before—the very sandwiches arranged in symmetrical order on the table under the window seemed to welcome her with the silent greeting of a long-established friendship. She knew their history so well. Had she not made them herself as many times as it had been her fate to give a so-called "evening"? As to the rest of the company, there was the usual sprinkling of elderly officers and their wives and an apparently limitless number of stray lieutenants who, commanded temporarily to Berlin, had been brought together by the natural law which unites exiles and outcasts. Her Excellency's son himself belonged to a regiment stationed in a southern state—hence the familiar "clique" which crowded his mother's rooms. Nora had seen enough to resign all hope before their hostess bore down upon them. The little old lady, who had been holding a veritable levee at the folding-doors, displayed all the naïve cordiality which belonged to her South German blood.

"How good of you to come!" she exclaimed, taking Nora's hand between both her own. "It is such a delightful evening—everybody is here, you know. And where is Herr von Arnim?"

Nora looked down smiling into the alert but deeply lined face. In any other country Her Excellency von Gersdorf would have cut rather a ridiculous figure. She had once been a great beauty, and though there were but few traces left of her former splendour, she had still retained the long ringlets and the flowered brocades of her youth. These and other eccentricities—she had a passion for reciting her own and other people's poetry on all possible and impossible occasions —were respectfully accepted by the mighty circle of her acquaintances. She was Her Excellency von Gersdorf, the widow of a high-standing Court official, and by birth a countess with sixteen untarnished quarterings; consequently at liberty to do, say, and dress exactly what and how she pleased, without exciting the slightest criticism. Nora knew all this; but in the brief pause between her hostess's question and her own answer she found herself again wondering what her English friends would say—what Miles would say.

"My husband sends his greetings and begs that your Excellency will excuse him," she answered. "He has some important work to-night and could not accompany me."

Frau von Gersdorf nodded, whilst her bright, bird-like eyes wandered over her guests.

"I know, I know; these General-Staff husbands are totally unreliable. But there, I dare say you will be able to amuse yourself without him. I think you must know everybody here?"

"Everybody," Nora responded gravely.

"And—*ach, ja, naturlich*! There is a countryman of yours who is most anxious to meet you again." She saw Nora's colour change, and added quickly, "I do not mean an Englishman—a captain from the dragoons in Karlsburg—Herr Rittmeister!"

A tall figure in a pale-blue uniform disengaged itself from a group of officers by the window and came towards them. Nora recognised Bauer instantly, but this time his good-looking face, with its expression of almost insolent indifference, aroused no feeling either of aversion or alarm. She determined to treat him as she would have treated any other acquaintance, satisfied that a great change divided the hot-headed child of then from the dignified married woman of now. Bauer's manner also reassured her. He kissed her extended hand with a grave respect which was almost apologetic and caused her to answer his greeting with an impulsive friendliness worthy of a younger and less experienced Nora.

Frau von Gersdorf nodded her satisfaction. She evidently felt that two of her guests were settled for the evening, and patted Nora's arm with a hand whose white beauty was one of the few remaining traces of the past.

"You two can talk Karlsburg news as soon as Herr Rebenski has finished his sonata," she said as she prepared to bustle off. "He is one of my protégés—a real genius, you know."

Bauer looked at Nora with a faint, whimsical grimace.

"Her Excellency has always a genius on hand," he said. "It is part of her own genius—this 'discovering' instinct. Apparently the latest belongs to the piano *virtuoso* class. We shall have to listen in respectful silence."

To confirm his statement, a profound hush fell upon the assembly. Those who could find chairs sat down, the others lined themselves along the wall and stood in various attitudes of attention or indifference. Bauer had discovered an empty alcove at the back of the room, and from this point of vantage Nora studied her surroundings with the keenness of her new vision. She had written home of her "brilliant life" and had not been hypocritical. For her it had at first been brilliant. The resplendent uniforms, the constant social intercourse, the courtly gallantry of her husband's comrades, the ring of grand names—all these features in her daily life had bewildered her, accustomed as she was to the stagnation and general dullness of Delford society. Now the thought of Miles's advent steadied her critical faculties. She saw behind the first glamour an almost extraordinary simplicity, a total indifference to what she had always looked upon as the refinements of life. These people cared for other things: the women thought little of their appearance—they gloried in their name and position; the men, beneath the polish of their manners, were something primitive in their tastes. Nora thought suddenly of her husband. How little he seemed to mind the narrow dimensions of his home, the ugliness of the furniture! How satisfied the elegant staff-officer seemed with his supper of cheap wine and sausage! Nora's sense of humour won the upper hand. She laughed to herself, and suddenly realised that the long sonata was at an end and that Bauer was speaking to her under cover of the renewed hubbub.

"*Gnädige Frau*, do you know why I am here to-night?" he asked.

Nora looked up.

"Probably because you were invited, and wished to enjoy a pleasant evening," she said, still smiling at her own thoughts.

"A pleasant evening!" he laughed. "*Gnädige Frau*, in an ordinary way I avoid these festivities like the plague. I came to-night because I had heard that you were coming. Please, do not frown like that—the statement is wholly innocent of impertinence. I wanted to meet you again because I wanted to apologise."

"To me?"

"Yes. Do you remember a certain morning in the forest at Karlsburg—a few weeks before your return to England? You were out riding with Captain von Arnim, and I galloped past you. I was told after wards that my furious riding had frightened your horse and that but for your future husband's presence of mind there might have been an accident. The thought has troubled me ever since."

Nora felt a pang of remorse. She felt that she had misjudged this man. Her previous conduct to him appeared inexcusably childish and prejudiced.

"You did not do it on purpose," she said gently.

"No; that is true. I did not see you until it was too late. Still, I had no business to ride like that—I was in the devil's own mood that morning."

"With a reason?"

"Yes; with a reason. Perhaps one day I will tell you about it—but not now. Am I forgiven?"

Nora nodded. She was reliving the moment when she had felt Wolff's arm snatch her, as it had seemed, from the brink of death; she saw again his white, frightened face, and answered truthfully:

"I have nothing to forgive. You did me no harm."

"No; I know," he said, as though he had divined her thoughts. Nora caught a glance of his face in the long mirror opposite, and was struck for a moment by the bitterness of his expression. He looked less indifferent than usual—almost disturbed.

"They say that if you give the devil a finger he takes the whole hand," he went on after a pause, and in a lighter tone. "Having obtained your forgiveness, I now come with a request, *gnädige Frau*."

"May it be as easily granted!" Nora answered, laughing.

"At any rate, it is not for myself this time. My sister-in-law, Frau Commerzienrat Bauer, has asked me to be a suppliant on her behalf. Perhaps you remember her? You met her at the Charity Bazaar last month."

Nora shook her head.

"I am a disgrace—I forget people's names so quickly," she said apologetically.

"My relation has a better memory—especially for those to whom she has taken a fancy. She has a special weakness for English people, and it seems she is most anxious to meet you again. She has, of course, quite another circle of acquaintances, and so is driven to the expedient of calling on you herself. Has she your permission?"

Something in the request or in the manner of its making jarred on Nora. She hesitated, not knowing why, and Bauer went on quickly:

"I know this form of proceeding is unusual, *gnädige Frau*, and I confess I should not have undertaken to be my sister-in-law's messenger if it had not been that I had heard you were expecting your brother. The two things do not seem to have much connection, but it struck me that it might interest him—and perhaps you—to see something of another side of German life. There *is* another side, *gnädige Frau*."

"I am very content with the one I know," Nora answered. She was conscious of a rising repugnance—and a rising curiosity.

Bauer laughed.

"That is natural enough. You have married an officer, and have made his set yours. But for your brother it will be different. I know a little of English life and of English tastes, and I fancy he will find all this—this sort of thing cramped and dull, not to say shabby. These people"—his tone became faintly tinged with condescension—"belong to the class which prides itself on being poor but noble, and on despising those who have acquired riches. When they have not enough to eat, they feast on the memory of their ancestors and are satisfied. But there is another class, thank Heaven, one which has taken your people as an example, *gnädige Frau*. The great commercial and financial potentates, who have flung off the foolish, narrow-hearted prejudices of the past—it is of them and of their lives which you should see something before you pass judgment."

Nora rose suddenly to her feet. She felt vaguely that a bribe had been offered her, and, what was worse, a bribe whose cunning effectiveness had been based on some instinctive knowledge of her mind. All her natural loyalty rose up in arms against it.

"I have not passed judgment," she said proudly. "I should never pass judgment on a people to whom I belong." Then the old impulsive kindness moved her to add: "All the same, I shall be pleased to renew my acquaintance with your sister-in-law at any time convenient to her."

She gave him her hand, a little ashamed of her previous outburst, and he bent over it and kissed it respectfully.

"Thank you, *gnädige Frau*."

She left him, and he stood there stroking his fair moustache and looking after her with amused and admiring eyes. Nor was he the only one to watch her quiet progress, for, little as she knew it, the child Nora had become a beautiful woman, and the charm of her new womanhood hung about her like a veil.

Later on, when the last of Her Excellency's protégés had performed their uttermost, and Frau von Seleneck and Nora had started on the home passage, the latter ventured a question

concerning Frau Commerzienrat Bauer. She did not know why she asked, and Frau von Seleneck's answer did not encourage further curiosity.

"I believe her father had a big furniture-shop somewhere," she said, "and her husband is something or the other on the money-market. I cannot imagine how the captain got into such a good regiment."

"He may be a very good officer," Nora said, conscious of a slight feeling of irritation.

Frau von Seleneck shrugged her shoulders.

"He may be. At any rate, I know nothing more about his relations." She lifted her skirts a little higher, though whether to avoid contamination with the mud or as a sign of her general disapproval was not clear. "They are very rich," she added indifferently.

## CHAPTER IV
### A VISITOR ARRIVES IN KARLSBURG

The square-built house in the Moltke Strasse was to let. A big notice in the front windows published the fact, although the curtains were still hanging, and the air of desolation which usually envelops "desirable residences," or their German equivalents, was not yet noticeable.

Inside, the signals of departure were more evident. The hall had been stripped bare of its scanty decorations, and in the disordered rooms a person of obviously Hebrew origin was to be seen roaming about with a pencil and a greasy note-book, making a careful inventory of the valuables. There was, indeed, only one room where the bustle and the confusion had been vigorously excluded and where the Hebrew gentleman's foot had not yet ventured to tread. This was Frau von Arnim's boudoir, and Hildegarde had taken refuge there like a shipwrecked mariner on a friendly island. She lay on her sofa with closed eyes and listened to the hammering and bumping of furniture over the bare boards. Only an occasional contraction of the fine brows and a tightening of the lips betrayed that she was awake, and that the sounds were painful to her.

Frau von Arnim, who was working at her accounts by the window, never failed to catch that fleeting expression of suffering. It was as though some invisible nerve of sympathy existed between her and the invalid, and that she knew when the dull ache kindled to poignant pain. For a time she remained silent, ignoring what she saw. Then she rose, and coming to Hildegarde's side, laid her hand tenderly upon the white forehead.

"Does it cost so much?" she asked. "Does it cost too much? Ought I never to have allowed so great a sacrifice?"

Instantly Hildegarde's eyes opened and revealed a brightness that they had not shown since the days when she had ridden at Wolff's side through the forest, and known neither suffering nor loss.

"It's not a sacrifice," she said, taking her mother's hand, and holding it in her own. "When I think of what we are going to do, and why we are doing it, I feel as though I were giving myself some selfish pleasure and making you pay the price. After all, from my sofa the world will look much the same in Berlin as it does here, and if I am sorry to leave, it is only because every room has its dear associations. You see, on my side it is only a sentimental sort of pain, which is rather agreeable than otherwise. But for you it is different. It will be so lonely for you, and I know how you hate flats—a suite of lofts in a badly managed hotel is what you used to call them."

Frau von Arnim smiled.

"You have a bad memory in so far as it retains foolish remarks, better forgotten," she said. "I am sure I shall be very happy in our new home, and in any case, I, too, have my pleasure from our 'plot.' I have just been reckoning that if we are careful we shall be able to allow them at least 1,000 marks more next year, and that will make all the difference in the world to them. They will not have to worry so much over their pfennige at any rate."

"If only Wolff will accept it!" Hildegarde said doubtfully. "He is like the rest of us all; and if he thinks, as I suppose he must, that we are giving up anything, he will call it a sacrifice and will refuse to accept it."

"He will do just what I tell him!" Frau von Arnim retorted, with a touch of half-laughing authority, which threw a sidelight on her conscious power over her entourage. "He will let me humbug him because there will be nothing else for him to do. I shall say that we have come to Berlin to be near them—which is true; that we prefer the quiet quarters—which is partly true; that we are doing our best to spend our money, but that, do what we will, there is always a

trouble—some 1,000 marks over, which won't be got rid of—which is not true at all. I shall offer it him as an indirect present to Nora, and Nora will secretly spend it on his dinners, and both will be all the happier; you need not be afraid."

Hildegarde's eyes flashed with amusement. She loved her mother in her triumphant, self-confident moods.

"I do not think I was afraid—really," she said. "I know by experience that you can twist most people round your finger. And Wolff is no exception."

She smiled to herself, and there was something wistful in her expression which Frau von Arnim was quick to perceive. She bent lower as though she wished to catch and interpret every shadow that crossed her daughter's face.

"And you will be glad to see them again, Hildegarde? You are strong enough? It will not make you unhappy?"

Hildegarde shook her head.

"It is true when I say that I am longing to see them," she said firmly. "I am happier—far happier now than in the time when I knew that, crippled though I was, Wolff would have married me, that I had only to stretch out my hand, as it were, for him to take it. It was so hard *not* to stretch out my hand; I had to crush down my love for him, and throw scorn on myself for daring to love at all. Every day I was afraid that I might betray myself. Now it is different. I can love him openly and honestly as my brother, and Nora I can love too without bitterness or envy as the one woman who could make him happy, or who was worthy of him. So you see, dearest, everything is for the best."

Frau von Arnim nodded, satisfied by the steady, cheerful voice.

"You have your reward," she said. "Rightly enough, Wolff traces all his happiness back to you, and his love and gratitude are in proportion."

"To his happiness?" Hildegarde suggested, smiling. "In that case I ought to be more than satisfied. Although, perhaps, for my sake he tries to hide that fact, it is obvious from his letters that he never knew what the real thing was until Nora became his wife. And I believe it will be lasting. We know Nora so well. We know how good and loving and honest she is. I do not think she will ever disappoint him or us."

"And Wolff, of course, could not disappoint any one, not even though he were advertised as perfect," Frau von Arnim observed slyly. "So we need feel no alarm for the future. And now I must go back to my accounts."

There was a long unbroken silence. Hildegarde seemed really asleep, or at least too deep in her own thoughts to notice the significant rumblings overhead, and her mother was frowning over the division of income, or rather the stretching of income over the hundred-and-one things necessary to the "keeping up of appearances." The latter occupation had been the constant worry of Frau von Arnim's life. Her poverty had always been of the brilliant kind, but it had been poverty none the less for that, and now this change had come it was not even to be brilliant. Not that she felt any regret. The "brilliancy" had only been maintained as a sort of sop to the family traditions, and now that the family honour seemed to concentrate itself on Wolff, it was only natural that the other members would be ready to make every sacrifice to support him and save him from the curse of pecuniary troubles, which is the curse of two-thirds of the German nobility. So the old home was to be given up, and the old pill-box brougham and such of the family relics as would find no place in the narrow dimensions of an *étage* were to drift into the hands of strangers. Both Frau von Arnim and Hildegarde, brought up in the stern code of their old race, found this course of events perfectly correct, and they would have done no less even if they had not cared for Wolff. Thus the frown upon Frau von Arnim's brow was caused not so much by trouble or regret as by a natural dislike for the consideration of pfennige, and it was with a movement of almost relief that she looked up presently, aroused from her unloved task by the ringing of the front-door bell.

"That must be Herr Sonnenthal again," she said. "He has probably come to tell us how much the carriage has fetched. Would you mind if I saw him in here?"

Hildegarde assented, but her mother's supposition proved incorrect. The untidy charwoman who put in her head a minute later informed them that there was a strange gentleman downstairs inquiring after a certain Fräulein whose name she, the charwoman, had not been able to grasp, and that, failing her, he had requested the honour of a few minutes' conversation with the *gnädige Frau* herself.

Frau von Arnim looked puzzled as she studied the card.

"I think there must be some mistake," she said. "However, show him up here."

For some reason or other nothing was said of the unknown visitor. It is possible that, as the wild beasts of the forest have an instinctive prescience of an enemy's approach, so we, in our higher world of sensitiveness, receive indefinable warnings when mischance is about to overtake us or a personality to enter into our lives and change its whole course. Certain it is that neither Frau von Arnim nor Hildegarde were fully at their ease as their visitor entered the room, and their response to his correct, somewhat stiff bow was marked by that frigidity which seems to ask of itself "Who are you? What do you want with us?"

Hildegarde had drawn herself up into a sitting position. The last two months had brought a marked change for the better in her health, and with a revival of the old strength had come a revival of the old pride and sensitiveness. She hated a stranger to see, and perhaps pity, her infirmity, and, moreover, on this occasion she was conscious of an inexplicable restlessness.

There was, at all events, nothing alarming in the stranger's appearance. A tall, carefully dressed man, with a thin sunken face, and a manner suggesting at once breeding and embarrassment, stood in the doorway, evidently uncertain as to his own course of conduct. As the silence threatened to grow awkward, Frau von Arnim took the initiative.

"From your card, and from what my servant tells me, I judge that you are English, Captain Arnold," she said, motioning him to be seated.

The visitor's face immediately lightened, and he advanced into the room, without, however, making further use of her invitation.

"I should be most thankful," he said. "If my German had not been of such a negligible quality I should not have had to trouble you. Indeed, until I heard you speak I feared my difficulties were by no means at an end. I hope you will excuse my intrusion?"

His sentences, like his manner, were somewhat wooden, and not calculated to inspire any particular warmth in his hearers. Having briefly introduced him to Hildegarde, Frau von Arnim repeated her invitation, which he now accepted, though with reluctance.

"I shall be glad to be of any service to you," Frau von Arnim said graciously. "English people are bound to me by at least one tie, and it is always a pleasure when I can assist any one of them. You need not apologise therefore."

Arnold smiled, and his expression suggested that he accepted her words as a formal politeness, and valued them as such.

"You are very kind," he said. "At the same time I trust that I need not trespass too much on your good-nature. I must explain that I have just returned from Africa, and Karlsburg lying on overland route, I stopped in the hope that Miss Ingestre were still staying here. Your servant, however, did not understand my German, or did not recognise the name——"

"The latter is certain," Frau von Arnim interrupted calmly. "The girl was not here when Miss Ingestre lived with us."

"Miss Ingestre has left, then?"

"Already—some months."

Captain Arnold rose abruptly. It was evident that his mission was at an end.

"In that case I do not need to trouble you further," he said. "I came on a mere supposition. Had I not travelled so quickly I should no doubt have heard from Miss Ingestre herself, but I have been on the road night and day, missing, apparently, every mail, and getting a good start on my own letters. I shall now have to hurry on to England as fast as possible."

"If you wish to meet Frau von Arnim your journey will be in vain," Hildegarde said. "She is at present in Berlin."

Arnold turned, and for the first time looked steadily at the speaker. It was evident that the words had had no meaning for him, but there was a curious, apparently causeless animosity and distrust in her steady eyes which arrested his attention and aroused in him emotions of a like nature. It was as though unconsciously they had hated each other before all time, and that the hatred had now become a definite recognisable quality.

"You spoke of Frau von Arnim," he said. "I am afraid I do not quite understand."

Hildegarde shrugged her shoulders. The movement was slightly insolent and utterly at variance with her usual gentle courtesy, but, like all nervous invalids, she could be goaded beyond all self-control, and something in this man's manner jarred on her as presumptuous, overbearing, suggesting an impertinent familiarity with the woman who was Wolff's wife.

"I think you must undoubtedly have missed your letters," she said; "otherwise you would know that Miss Ingestre ceased to exist many months ago."

The next minute she regretted her own clumsiness. The man's whole bearing and expression had changed. His face was livid; it was obvious that he had a hard task to control an

extraordinary agitation.

"You must think me very stupid," he said, and his voice was painful to listen to. "I beg of you to speak more clearly. You will perhaps understand what it means to me when I tell you what you seem not to know—that Miss Ingestre is to be my wife."

"Captain Arnold, you are labouring under some strange delusion. Miss Ingestre is already married."

It was Frau von Arnim who spoke. She had advanced almost unconsciously, and now stood half-way between him and Hildegarde, who had risen to her feet.

Arnold said nothing. His eyes were fixed full on Frau von Arnim's face, but his expression was absolutely blank, and he did not seem to see her. She waited, too disturbed to move farther forward along the path of inevitable explanation, and after a minute, in which the man's whole moral strength seemed to be concentrated in the fight for self-mastery, Arnold himself broke the silence.

"I can only believe that there is a misapprehension on both sides," he said. "Are you speaking of Miss Nora Ingestre?"

"Of Miss Nora Ingestre that was."

"And you say she is already married?"

"In April—five months ago."

"To whom?"

"To Hauptmann von Arnim, at present officer on the Staff at Berlin."

"You are sure of what you say? There is no possible mistake?"

Frau von Arnim's brows contracted proudly. For a brief moment she had sympathised with, and even pitied, his agitation. His rigid self-control, entailing as it did an increased abruptness of manner, impressed her disagreeably, hiding from her usually keen eyes the fact that the man was really suffering. She answered therefore, with considerable haughtiness:

"There is no possible mistake. You will see that for yourself when I tell you that Herr von Arnim is my nephew, and that I myself was at the wedding at Delford."

Arnold bowed. His expression was now normal, and it suggested no more than the calm interest of an ordinary caller on an ordinary topic of conversation.

"You are perfectly right," he said. "There is no possible mistake. I am very grateful to you for your explanation."

He included Hildegarde in his curt salute, and turned towards the door.

Frau von Arnim detained him with a decided and indignant gesture.

"The matter cannot end there," she said. "You have suggested that Miss Ingestre was engaged to you at the time of her betrothal with my nephew. It is a suggestion intensely offensive to us all. It is now my turn to point out to you that you are making a mistake—or worse."

Arnold coloured with anger.

"I am not likely to make a mistake of such magnitude," he said. "Of your second insinuation I need take no notice."

"In that case I must ask you to be more explicit. I—we have a right to an explanation."

"Excuse me—I fail to see that any one has a right in a matter which concerns Miss Ingestre—Frau von Arnim, and myself alone."

"The matter concerns my nephew and us all."

Arnold smiled ironically.

"I regret that I cannot sympathise with your point of view," he said. "In any case, I have no explanation to offer."

There was a blank silence. It was the more marked because it followed on a sharp lightning-like exchange, kept within bounds of outward courtesy only by the education and upbringing of the conflicting personalities. Frau von Arnim, usually armed with a kindly wisdom which had sympathy for all sorts and conditions of men, was brought nearer to a display of uncontrolled anger than in all her life before. To her mind, Arnold had, unwittingly perhaps, cast a slur upon the credit of one who was a member of her family; and her family was Frau von Arnim's fetish. He had done so, moreover, without offering proof or justification, and the latter offences deepened his guilt, though their omission would not have shielded him from her enmity.

Arnold, on his side, saw a haughty, domineering woman who claimed the right to investigate a personal overwhelming calamity in which she had no share, and with which he could as yet only grapple in blind, half-incredulous pain. He disliked her instinctively, but also because he could not understand the motives and principles which governed her conduct towards himself. He continued speaking after a moment, and his irritation was so intense that it helped him to

overcome, almost forget, his own misery.

"I think there is nothing more to be said," he observed, looking Frau von Arnim coldly in the face. "It seems I have blundered, and it is only right that I should bear the brunt of the consequences alone. I am sure you will agree with me that it will be best for this—what has passed between us—to be kept entirely to ourselves, to be forgotten. It can only bring trouble to others, and, as I have said, I am alone to blame."

In spite of everything, he was thinking of Nora, seeking to shield her from the results of his betrayal of a cruel duplicity.

Frau von Arnim was thinking of Wolff, and of the woman to whom he had entrusted his happiness—above all things, their name.

"What you suggest is impossible," she said. "There are things one cannot forget—at least not until they have been explained. We must therefore look for the explanation."

"I have none to give," Arnold returned, with bitter truth.

"Then we must look elsewhere."

"It would be better to do as I suggest, and leave the matter alone, or lay it to my account—to my own stupid muddle." He spoke hurriedly, for he felt afraid of this woman, with her haughty, resolute face. It was as though, unwittingly, he had roused to action a force which had passed out of his control.

"If there is any shadow of wrong connected with my nephew's marriage, it must be cleared," Frau von Arnim answered. "That is the only wisdom I know."

Arnold bowed a second time, and went.

For a long time after he had gone the two women remained silent, motionless, avoiding each other's eyes. The action seemed to imply that nothing had happened.

Hildegarde had long since fallen wearily back upon her couch. She roused herself then, and turned her white, troubled face towards her mother.

"The man must be mad!" she said, almost violently. "Nora could never have done such a thing. She is so frank and honest. She would have told us from the beginning. I could have sworn that she never cared for a man before she loved Wolff. I do not believe a word of it."

"Nor I," her mother answered calmly. "As you say, the man may be mad—though he did not seem so—or there may really be some mistake. But we must make sure, for our own peace of mind, and Nora is the only one who can help us. Even so we must have patience and wait. We have no right to trouble her so early in her married life with what, I pray, may be a false alarm."

"You must ask her when we are in Berlin," Hildegarde said, in the same sharp, determined tone. "I could not see her every day like that and not know."

"You are quite right. When we are settled in Berlin I will tell her everything that has happened. Until then we must believe the best."

"Yes, of course—believe the best," Hildegarde answered thoughtfully.

## CHAPTER V
### THE CUB AS LION

The express steamed in between the crowded platforms of the Potsdamer Bahnhof, and from one of the windows of a carriage labelled "Vlissingen" a rather sallow face and a loud voice announced the fact that Mr. Miles Ingestre had made his triumphal entry into the Fatherland.

Nora, who had been threading her way through the crowd, with Wolff's arm in hers, ran off and was received by her brother with that English prosaicness which has the advantage of being equally admirable as Spartan disguise for rich and noble emotions or as an expression of no emotion at all.

"Hullo, old girl, how are you?"

"Very well, thanks. What was the journey like?"

"Might have been worse. There were a lot of beastly Germans in the carriage, so of course the windows——" He caught sight of Wolff, who had approached at a more leisurely pace, and his tone shaded down somewhat. "Hullo, Wolff, how are you?"

They shook hands, and whilst the *Gepäckträger* was bustling round in the search for the new-comer's luggage, one of those painful silences threatened to set in which are the ghosts at all meetings where joy is too deep for words, or too shallow to stand much demonstration. Of the three, Miles himself was the only one who was sincerely in high spirits. They broke out in spurts

and seemed regulated very much by how far he was conscious of Wolff's presence. It was evident that his respect for his brother-in-law had gone up several degrees since the afternoon when he had criticised the latter's Karlsburg civilian clothes, though whether that respect had its source in a juster appreciation of his relative's character or in the knowledge that Wolff was now master in his own country was hard to determine. Certain it is that he did his best to be amiable after his own fashion.

"I assure you I have been simply wild to come," he said as they made their way together towards the exit of the station. "It was as stale as ditch-water at home, and I was getting fairly fed up with it all. So I piled on my 'nerves,' as the pater calls them, and dropped a few hints about the place, which the old man picked up quite brightly—for him. He was really quite game about it, and sent all sorts of amiable messages to you, Wolff."

"Thanks. By the way, how long does your leave extend? You seem pretty liberal with that sort of thing in your Army."

Miles chuckled.

"My leave extends to all eternity," he said enigmatically, and then, as he saw Nora's astonished face, he condescended to explanation. "I've chucked the Army, you know. I thought the pater had told you. I was fairly fed up with the drudgery and the routine of it all. It wasn't so bad at first. It gave one a kind of standing, and as long as there was plenty of money going a fellow could amuse himself fairly well. But when the pater began drawing in the purse-strings I had enough of it. Ugh! Imagine duty one half of the day and trying to make both ends meet the other half! No, thanks!"

He shuddered, and Nora looked at him anxiously.

"Then what are you going to do afterwards?" she asked.

"Go into some business or other—something where one can make money as fast as possible. By the way, Wolff, is it true that you are on the general staff?"

"Yes; it is quite true, fortunately."

"I see—great gun. Hard work, though, I suppose?"

"Yes——" Arnim hesitated, as though on the point of making some remark, and then added innocently enough, "Perhaps you would have found it less of a drudgery than the usual routine, but scarcely remunerative enough."

Miles glanced uneasily at his brother-in-law, and then subsided, to all appearance suppressed, but Nora, who walked on his other side, caught a fleeting grimace, which was all too easy to translate into Miles's vernacular. She was secretly thankful when her husband had seen them both into a cab and closed the door.

"I shall be home late to-night," he said. "Don't stay up for me, dear, if you are tired."

He waited on the pavement until they drove off, and Nora's eyes sought to convey to him an unusual tenderness. There was indeed something remorseful and apologetic in her manner which she herself could hardly have explained. For the first time she was conscious of being almost glad that he was not coming home, and her sense of relief when at length the *droschke* actually started on its way was so keen that she felt herself guilty of disloyalty. "It is only the first evening," she thought in self-defence. "They are such strangers to each other. Wolff might not understand Miles. It will be better when they know each other and are friends."

"Where is Wolff to-night?" Miles inquired, breaking in upon her troubled thoughts. "Any spree on?"

"It is his *Kriegsspiel* night," Nora answered. "He has to go."

Miles chuckled sceptically.

"Rather good for us, anyhow," he said. "We can talk so much better, can't we?"

Nora was thankful for the half-darkness. The angry colour had rushed to her cheeks. And yet her brother's words, tacitly placing Wolff in the position of an outsider as they did, were little more than a brutalised edition of her own thoughts.

"I hate it when he is not at home," she said loyally. "Of course, to-night it is different, but as a rule it is very lonely without him."

"But you have plenty of people who could come and see you?"

"Y—es. Still, there are evenings when there is no one."

"Well, you have got me now," said Miles consolingly. He was busy gazing out of the carriage window, and for a time the bustling, lighted streets occupied his whole attention. Nora made no attempt to distract him. She was not feeling very happy not as happy as she knew she ought to be —and the fact worried her. Presently they turned into a quiet street and Miles sank back with a sigh of satisfaction.

"It seems a lively enough sort of place," he said. "I expect you have a gay time, don't you?"

"I am very happy," said Nora, with unusual eagerness.

"Yes, of course, but I meant gay—dances and dinners and all that sort of thing. The pater ran into some fellow who had just come back from a trip to Berlin, and he said the officers had no end of a time—were treated like the lords of creation, in fact, especially if they had a bit of a title stuck on to their names. Wolff is a baron, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Nora abruptly.

"I thought so. Pater stuck him up a peg to this chap and said he was a count. Barons aren't much in Germany, though. They're as common as herrings."

"*They* don't think so," Nora protested, hot with annoyance. "They think a good deal of it."

"Yes—snobs. That's what this fellow said. However, I don't mind. The good time is the only thing I care about, and you seem to have that all right by your letters."

Nora's brows contracted. In a rapid mental review she passed over everything she had ever written home, and reconsidered it in the light of Miles's possible judgment. Frau von Seleneck gave dinners. There were never more than four simple courses, whose creation, she proudly admitted, was owed almost entirely to her own skill. The orderly waited at table, and it was a standing joke that somebody's dress or uniform had to pay for his too eager attentions. Nora remembered having written home that she had enjoyed herself immensely, and she had written in perfect truth. She had happened to like the people on that particular occasion, and above all things Wolff himself had been there. This wonderful fact of Wolff's presence was indeed sufficient to colour the most dismal entertainment in Nora's opinion; but in Miles's opinion, she felt with painful certainty, it would have less than no effect. He did not love Wolff as she did, and without love her "brilliant life" might, after all, be more correctly viewed as a hard if cheerful struggle against necessity.

"There is always something going on," she said at length; "but you must not expect anything too wonderful, dear. People in Germany live much more simply than we—than in England, you know. And—we are not rich." She made the last confession with an effort—not in the least because she was ashamed, but because—Nora herself could have given no explanation.

Miles laughed.

"I don't expect you live in a loft," he said.

Nora thought of their little fourth-floor flat and laughed too—also with an effort for which there was no possible reason.

The droschke pulled up with a grind against the curbstone, and a gruff voice informed them that they had arrived at their destination. Miles jumped out and looked about him doubtfully.

"What a poky street!" he said, rather as though he thought the coachman must have made a mistake. "Is this really your house?"

"Our flat is here," Nora said. "We—we like it because it is so quiet."

And then she was ashamed of herself, because she knew that she had not been honest.

Miles showing no intention of paying the coachman, she paid him herself out of her own slender purse, and they began the ascent of the narrow stone steps which led to the heights of their *étage*. She knew that Miles was rapidly becoming more puzzled, but she made no attempt to elucidate matters—indeed, could not have done so. Never before had she found the stairs so endless, so barren, so ugly. The chill atmosphere, which yet succeeded in being stuffy, seemed to penetrate into every corner of her heart and weight it down with a leaden depression. She did not look at Miles when they stood crowded together on the narrow landing, nor when her little maid-of-all-work, Anna, opened the door and grinned a more than usually friendly welcome. She led the way into the so-called drawing-room and switched on the electric light—their one luxury—half-hoping that some miracle might have mercifully worked among the plush chairs and covered them with a much-needed elegance. But they stood as they had always stood, in spite of the most careful arranging in the world—stiff and tasteless as though they had come out of the front window of a cheap furniture shop—which, in point of fact, they had—and would not forget that they were "reduced goods." Nora had a kind of whimsical affection for them—they were so hopelessly atrocious that it would have been uncharitable to criticise; but to-night something like hatred welled up in her heart against their well-meaning ugliness. She had felt much the same when Frau von Seleneck had first visited her, but that lady had burst into such unfeigned raptures that the feeling had passed. But Miles said nothing, and his silence was, if exclamatory, not rapturous.

Nora turned to him. She was ashamed of her shame, but with all the will in the world she could only meet his wide-open stare with a sort of defiance which betrayed that she knew already

what he was thinking, that she had even foreseen it.

"This is the drawing-room," she said lamely. "We don't often use it, though. It is not as—comfortable as the others."

"I should hope not," he said. He was looking around him with such real and blank astonishment that poor Nora could have laughed if the tears of bitter humiliation had not been so near the surface. Bravely, and with the recklessness of one who feels that the worst is over and nothing else matters, she pushed open the folding-doors.

"The dining-room," she said, as though she were introducing a poor relation of whom she was trying not to be ashamed.

Miles inspected the imitation mahogany table and chairs with his eyebrows still at an elevated angle, but now less with surprise as with a supercilious disgust.

"Is this where you have your dinner parties?" he asked.

Nora heard and understood the irony, and it gave her back her nerve and pride.

"Yes," she said. "We do not have them often, because we cannot afford them. When we do we only have our best friends, and they find the room big enough and good enough."

Miles made no further observation, though his silence was a work of art in unexpressed things, and Nora led him to their little *Fremdenzimmer*. She had prepared it with the greatest care. There was a jar of flowers on the dressing-table, and everything smelt of freshness and cleanliness, but she had not been able to stretch its dimensions, and it was with unanswerable justice that Miles inquired where he was expected to keep his things.

"You can keep one of your boxes under the bed," Nora said in some confusion. "The others are being put in the corridor. I'm afraid you'll have to go outside when you want anything. I am very sorry, dear."

"That's all right," Miles said, with sudden and surprising amiability. "I'll manage somehow."

Nora left him to make what toilette he chose, thankful to be alone for a moment. She went straight back to the drawing-room and faced each chair in turn with an unflinching eye. Her shame was over and her spirit was up in arms. In that moment she cared nothing for Miles's opinion nor the opinion of the whole world. This was her home—her and Wolff's home—and he who chose to despise it could shake the dust off his feet and go elsewhere. She could almost have embraced the ugliest chair, and she was so proud of her own loyal enthusiasm that she did not recognise it for what it really was—the last desperate refuge of her deeply humbled pride. She went about her work singing to herself—a thing she rarely did—and told herself that she was in excellent spirits. It cost her no effort to leave the dining-room door open whilst she laid the table. Let Miles see her! What did she care? And if he jeered and asked if she waited at her own dinner parties or covered her little home with the wealth of his contempt, had she not one triumphant answer?

"Small and poor it may be, but it contains everything I care for on this earth!"

She felt so sure of herself that when her brother entered half an hour later, she lifted a face from which a happy smile had brushed away every sign of storm and conflict.

"How quick you have been!" she cried. "And, oh, Miles, what a magnificent man!"

He laughed self-consciously and glanced down at his immaculate evening-clothes.

"Not a bad fit, are they?" he said. "Poole's, you know. I suppose you don't change here, do you?"

Nora flinched in spite of herself.

"We do when we can," she said, still cheerful; "but very often Wolff comes back so late that he has no time to do more than wash and slip into his *Litewka*. Poor fellow! He has to work so frightfully hard."

Again Miles said nothing, and again Nora felt that his silence was more effective than the longest speech. But still borne on the high tide of her enthusiasm, she went on arranging the knives and forks, and only her burning cheeks betrayed that she was not so entirely at her ease. Suddenly, to her complete bewilderment, she found Miles's arm about her and her own head against his shoulder.

"Poor little Nora!" he said. "Poor little sister!"

Nora gasped. He had never been affectionate in his life before, and the tone of manly tenderness was so new as to be almost incredible. She threw back her head and looked into his face with mingled laughter and wonder. He was perfectly serious, and for the first time it dawned on her that there was a real change in him which went deeper than the evening-dress, that he had in fact left boyhood behind him and assumed something of the manners and bearing of a man, something, too, of his father, the Rev. John Ingestre. Gradually her smile died away under

the undisturbed seriousness of his gaze.

"Why, what is the matter, Miles?" she asked. "I have never known you like this before."

He bent his head and kissed her.

"It struck me when I was dressing that I had been a bit of a brute," he said. "I am awfully sorry, dear. I had imagined everything so very different that it fairly took my breath away, and I said—well, what had no doubt been better left unsaid. I thought you had humbugged us and I was inclined to be angry. When I thought it over I saw how it all was and I was awfully sorry. Poor old girl!"

She caught her breath, seeking wildly for words to answer him, but none came. She had been prepared for and armed against scorn, not against this brotherly sympathy! Sympathy! What had she to do with sympathy? Sympathy was an insult to Wolff—an insult to their love!

With an effort she tried to free herself.

"You don't understand," she stammered.

"Oh, yes, I think I do," he interrupted. "I understand all that you won't tell me, because you are such a decent little soul; and I will say this and no more: I wish to Heaven it had been another man, Nora, a fine English fellow who would have given you a decent English home. I wish it had been poor old Arnold——"

"Miles, let me go!"

She wrenched herself from his hands. She had seen what he had not seen—Wolff standing in the open doorway, watching them with a curiously pale, grave face. Had he heard, and if he had heard, had he understood? Nora could not tell. Furious with Miles and with herself, she ran to him and put her arms about his neck.

"Oh, how glad I am that you have come!" she cried incoherently. "You are just in time for supper. How did you manage to get away so early?"

He kissed her upturned face. Lips and hands were icy.

"I got special leave," he said. "I thought"—a forced lightness struggled through his gravity—"I thought it was not good manners to desert my own table on the first evening. I am glad that I managed—to come in time. I shall be ready in a minute."

He turned and went into his dressing-room, giving neither time to answer. Nora stared blankly after him. She felt as though she had allowed some one to strike him across the face without protest, and that he had gone away, not angrily, but wounded—perhaps beyond her powers of healing.

"What a pity!" she heard Miles say behind her. "I had looked forward to our evening together."

Nora turned. In her anger and desperation, she could scarcely keep her voice under control.

"Do not talk like that, Miles," she said. "What you think of Wolff does not matter. I am his wife, and this is his home. Remember that!"

Miles put his hand in his pocket and smiled. His smile suggested a perfect understanding.

"I have said what I want to say," he observed. "I shall not need to say it again."

## CHAPTER VI
### IN WHICH THE REV. JOHN RECEIVES A SHOCK

A few days after his arrival, Miles wrote home in the following terms:

"MY DEAR FATHER AND MOTHER,

"I have landed safely, as you know by my telegram, and I expect you are wondering why I have not written before. As a matter of fact, I wanted to have a look round me to see how things were before I broke the news to you. I tell you honestly, if it were not for Nora's sake, and because, of course, I want to pick up some of the lingo, I should have packed up my trunks and come home by the next train. You know how Nora described things to us. You might have imagined them living in palatial apartments with a footman and I don't know what to wait on them.

"Well, my palatial apartment measured eight by eight, and when I get out of bed I have to take care that I don't fall out of the window or into the water-jug. As to the footman, he is a scrubby-looking orderly, who drops bits of potato down your collar whilst he is serving and can't understand a word you say to him. So much for my share of the grandeur. There are four other

rooms and they have all about the same dimensions, and have evidently been furnished out of some second-hand place by some one who suffered from colour-blindness. As to the atmosphere! Imagine a kitchen-range with the fat in the fire and you have an idea. Of course, Nora, being English, keeps the windows open, but that's not much good, because we look out on to houses in the front and dirty yards at the back; in fact, I shouldn't think there was a breath of fresh air for miles round. Well, I was fairly thunderstruck, I can tell you, and I have been in varying stages of that condition ever since.

"My first dinner—I had an appetite like a wolf—would have made any ordinary wolf turn tail. Nora said she had had to leave it to the cook, and so everything had gone wrong. It *had*, and the only wonder is that *I* didn't go wrong afterwards. The soup was a miniature salt-lake, the meat so tough I couldn't get my knife through it, and the pudding—I never got to the bottom of that pudding, and I hope I never shall. It was a ghastly meal; Wolff was as glum as an undertaker, and Nora as near crying as she could be without coming to the real thing, and I wasn't particularly sprightly, as you can imagine.

"However, at last I got to bed—or the thing which they call a bed—an iron affair with no springs that I could find, and a rotten, puffed-out air-cushion for a covering, which fell off five times in the night and had to be fished up from the floor. At seven o'clock—seven o'clock if you please!—I was thumped awake by the orderly, who had planted a five-inch pot of lukewarm water in my basin. He jabbered a lot which I didn't understand, and then of course I went to sleep again. At about nine I yelled for my bath, and in came Nora, looking awfully tired and worried. It seems she had been up ever since seven slaving at the house—I mean loft—trying to get it shipshape before lunch. After a lot of fuss I got hold of Wolff's hip-bath and had some sort of a wash, getting down to breakfast at ten. Breakfast! Coffee and rolls! Coffee and rolls! I wonder if I shall ever get a square meal again! Wolff had already gone off and didn't get back till lunch, when we had a new edition of supper (which, it appears, had been extra grand on my account). He doesn't seem to mind what he eats, and is always talking shop, which, I am sure, bores Nora as much as it does me.

"What a beastly lot these German fellows think of themselves and their beastly army! He talks about it as though it were a sort of holy institution compared to which nothing else mattered, and goes clattering about the house with his spurs like a god on wheels. Thank Heaven he is not at home much, or we should be having rows in no time. Yesterday, for instance, I came down at ten for breakfast, and in the afternoon he spoke to me about it as though I were a sort of raw recruit—said it gave Nora a lot of extra work, and that he must ask me to be more punctual. I held my tongue for Nora's sake, but I longed to give him a bit of my mind in good English. I longed to ask him why, if he is so keen on Nora being spared, he doesn't see that she has a proper cook and housemaid, why he lets her work like a servant herself whilst he goes off and amuses himself—as I know he does. He can't be badly off. His uniforms are spotless, and he has a ripping horse, which he rides every day. A lot of riding Nora gets—except now and again on borrowed regimental hacks! As to the theatre, she has only been twice since they were married—it's too expensive in Berlin forsooth! and I know for a fact that she has not had a new dress. I suppose all Germans treat their wives like that; but it makes my blood boil to think that Nora should have to put up with it.

"As to their grand friends, I don't think much of them. They all seem to live in the same poky style, and the dinner we were invited to the other day fairly did for me. We sat something like two hours over three courses, each one worse than the other, and the people shouted and jabbered as though they were in a monkey-house. What with the food and the bad wine and the row, I hardly knew whether I was on my head or my heels. Wolff and I had a bit of a jar about it afterwards. He said it was *gemütlich*, or whatever the word is, and I said it was beastly and that wild horses wouldn't drag me into such a show again, whereupon he had the cheek to inform me that I probably wouldn't be asked and that he thought it was bad form to criticise one's host because he didn't happen to be rich. Nora was nearly in tears, so I held my tongue; but you can guess what I felt like. Imagine that foreigner trying to teach *me* good form! Of course, I know, mother, that you had a weakness for Wolff, but you should see him in his own home—a selfish, bullying martinet, whose head I should be heartily delighted to punch. Perhaps I shall one day. Don't worry about me, though. I shall be able to look after myself.

"There is one rather nice fellow here—a Captain Bauer, who has been really decent to me and taken me about. He has rich relations with some style about them—if you only knew what an oasis 'style' is in this desert!—and I fancy they mean to give Nora and myself a good time. Wolff tries not to show how wild he is about it, though why he should mind I have no idea. Besides that,

I have run up against some nice English fellows, and when I can't stand things and feel in need of a square meal, I go out with them and have a run round. In any case I shall remain, for Nora's sake. At the bottom, I believe she is wishing herself well out of the mess, and so I shall stay as long as possible to help her."

In answer to this description of Nora's home life, the Rev. John wrote to his daughter an epistle fulminating in grief, reproaches, sympathy, and advice. Let it be said in praise of his epistolary abilities, that without ever getting as far as "I told you so!" he implied that sentence at least once on every one of the eight closely written sheets.

"My poor child!" he wrote at the close. "I cannot tell you how this revelation has shocked and grieved me. Alas! I can hardly call it revelation, for did not my father's instinct prophesy everything as it has come to pass? I cannot but admire your noble silence, your generous concealment of the true facts of your life. I can understand how you wish to shield your husband from all reproach, and I am the last one to attempt to turn you from your duty to him. Nevertheless, I beseech you, give us your whole confidence. Let us help you to bear your burden, and if it should grow too heavy, remember that your home awaits you and that your father's arms are always open."

Mrs. Ingestre had added a brief note to this long oration. The handwriting was less firm than of old, as though it had cost an effort, but the short, concise sentences were full of strength and insight.

"Do you still love each other?" she asked. "For if you still love your husband and he still loves you, I need offer neither sympathy nor pity. You are to be envied, and I pray only that you will let no one—not even those dearest to you—come between you and your great happiness. If Miles is stupid and troubles you, send him home."

This little note was first wept over and then hidden away in a secret drawer, but the letter went to the flames, thrown there by an angry, indignant hand.

"How dare he!" Nora thought in a passion of resentment. "How dare any one pity me!"

And she sat down in that same hour and wrote home a protest and a defence which, it is to be feared, was often incoherent and still more often lacking in respect. But her intention was clear. It was condensed in the closing sentences:

"No one has the right to criticise my husband or my house. I love them both, and for me they are the most perfect in the world. Those who really love me will do well to remember this and spare me both advice and misplaced sympathy."

After which this declaration of war, she went out to meet Wolff and greeted him with a delight and tenderness which was almost feverish, almost too marked. It was as though she were saying to herself: "See how much I love him! And if I love him nothing else can matter."

## CHAPTER VII

### WOLFF SELLS A HORSE AND NORA LOSES A FRIEND

In the broad Exerzier-Platz of the Grenadier barracks a little group of officers were watching the paces of a handsome chestnut thoroughbred, which was being galloped and cantered past them for their inspection. Occasionally they exchanged a terse criticism, but for the most part they were silent, intent upon the business of the moment. The shorter of the three men—a somewhat languid-looking captain of the Hussars—followed the movements of the rider with a professional admiration.

"Too bad, *Donnerwetter*! really too bad!" he exclaimed, as Arnim at length rode up and swung himself out of the saddle. "That one fellow should have brains and a seat like that as well is a direct injustice. But you are wasted on the Staff, my dear Arnim; sheer wasted. They don't know what to do with such material—the *langweilige Streber*! But at the head of a Hussar squadron you would cut a figure—*auf Ehre*, I would give a quarter's pay to have you with Us, and

I know a *Cavallerist* when I see one. Here, let me try him. You would make an old cab-horse step out!"

Wolff laughed shortly.

"By all means, Herr Graf," he said. "You will find that the credit of the performance is more Bruno's than mine."

He stood aside and watched the Count mount and ride slowly off to the other end of the square. His face had been flushed with the recent exercise and the natural joy which a man takes in his own skill and strength, but Seleneck, who was observing him closely, saw that the momentary animation had covered over unusual weariness—even depression. There were lines between the strongly marked brows which the elder man did not like. They were new to Wolff's face, and betokened something more than mere mental strain. They indicated trouble, and trouble also of a new kind.

With an affectionate movement, Seleneck slipped his arm through Wolff's and led him a little apart, as though to point out some special features in the Count's equestrian performance. In reality he was indulging in the grumble which had been choking him for the last hour.

"What a silly fellow you are!" he said. "You have a horse which most of us would give our ears to possess, and you sell it for about half its value. I could hardly believe my senses when I happened to come down on you in the middle of the transaction. It was the shock of my life."

"Your life must be remarkably free from shocks, then," Wolff observed grimly. "It was at any rate one that I had every intention of sparing you."

"I have no doubt. You looked glum enough when I appeared. But that makes it worse. It proves that you know you are doing a silly thing, and are ashamed of it. Seriously, though, whatever has induced you to part with Bruno? You told me only the other day that there wasn't another horse like it in Berlin."

"That was perfectly true. But that is no reason why I should keep such a paragon to myself."

Seleneck took another hasty inspection of his friend's face.

"Does it hurt to smile like that when you are losing your most treasured possession?" he asked quizzically.

"You exaggerate things," Wolff returned, with a movement of impatience. "If I find that I have no need of a horse in Berlin, that it is both a trouble and an expense, there is no need to immediately adopt a tone of high tragedy. Besides, Graf Stolwitz is giving a very fair price, from his point of view. I cannot expect him to pay for my personal attachment to his purchase."

"If I did not know you as I do, I should think you had been gambling," Seleneck said, in his turn slightly ruffled. "At any rate, I am not going to stand by and see the deed. *Auf wiedersehen*."

Wolff's ears, quick to catch and interpret every shade of tone, had heard the irritation in his friend's voice, and he turned quickly, as though shaking off a weight of preoccupation.

"Forgive me, *lieber alter Kerl*," he said. "I'm a bear this afternoon, and ready to snap off anybody's head. Don't take any notice of me. And don't worry about Bruno. Everything has its reason."

"You are working too hard," Seleneck declared. "That's what's the matter with you. I shall speak to your wife."

"Please do nothing of the sort," Wolff said firmly. "In the first place, it isn't true; and in the second, it would only worry her. Every man has his own battles to fight, and every man must fight them alone. Such is the law of things, and I am no exception."

"If such *were* the law of things I should have nothing more to say," Seleneck retorted, "but the man who will neither confide in his friend or his wife is running full-tilt against nature, and must pay for the consequences. If I did not let Elsa have her share of my fights, she would be perfectly miserable—and with reason. I should be depriving her of the one thing that keeps a woman happy—trouble."

Wolff laughed.

"You are an ideal couple," he said.

"And you—are you not an ideal couple?"

"Of course—ideal."

Seleneck waited a moment, as though he expected from Wolff's tone that there was more to come, but the younger man remained silent, to all appearances intent on watching the Count, who was walking his purchase towards them. There was no irony or bitterness in his expression, but also none of the happiness which one might have expected from the one half of an "ideal couple," and Seleneck turned away with a sigh of resignation.

"I think strategy and statistics and military secrets have gone to your head," he said. "You are

developing sphinx-like habits which are too much for my childish intellect. Still, when you want me you will know where to find me."

Wolff turned, as though struck by a sudden thought.

"I want you now, Seleneck," he said quickly. "At least, there is something I want your advice about. You know, I suppose, that my wife's brother is staying with us?"

"I heard something about it," Seleneck admitted, with a sudden uneasiness. In truth, he had heard a great deal about it—from his wife. Hitherto, neither Nora nor her brother had called at the little flat, and this deliberate, inexplicable breach of etiquette had grown to be something worse than a grievance in Frau von Seleneck's usually pacific heart. But Seleneck knew himself to be no diplomatist, and held his peace.

"Well, I fancy that time hangs pretty heavy on his hands. Of course, I am too busy to do much in the entertaining line—and I have an idea that I am too German for his taste. At any rate, my wife is very anxious that he should see something more of Berlin life—the social life, you know—and that he should have a—a good impression."

"I can quite understand that," Seleneck said slowly. "We'll do everything we can. Let me see, Elsa was talking of giving a little dinner next week. I'll tell her to include him in the invitation."

"Thank you," Wolff answered. He was staring hard in front of him, and an uncomfortable flush had mounted his cheeks. "It's very good of you both," he added, as though ashamed of his own lack of enthusiasm. "As a matter of fact, Miles has found entertainment enough for the present. He has picked up with Bauer, who appears to have some rich relations here. My—my wife has got to know them too."

"Yes, so I heard," Seleneck observed grimly.

Wolff looked up, frowning.

"Is there any objection?" he demanded.

"I don't know, *alter Junge*." Seleneck hesitated, conscious again of a failing diplomacy, but goaded on by a sense of duty. "The Bauers are immensely wealthy, but they do not belong to our set, and Bauer himself is not the sort of man to whom I should like to trust a young fellow—or, indeed, any one," he added almost inaudibly.

"What do you mean by that?"

Seleneck faced the stern eyes with the courage of desperation.

"I mean—I feel I ought to tell you—your wife's intimacy with the Bauers is causing ill-feeling. It is all nonsense, of course, but you know how it is—people talk. Forgive me for putting it plainly—Bauer has a bad reputation. They say he has already escaped dismissal from the Army by a hair's-breadth. It is well to be careful." He waited a moment, and then went on, "It has been on my mind some time, Wolff. I felt I ought to warn you, but was afraid you might take it amiss."

Wolff shook his head.

"You have only told me what I already suspected," he said quietly; "and of course, now that I know, I shall speak to Nora about it. She will see how it is at once. It is all my fault—I should have taken more care. And then, there is another thing——"

"Is it anything in which I can help?" Seleneck asked, as Wolff again hesitated. "You know you have only got to say what it is. There need be no humbug between us."

"No; that's true."

Seleneck waited patiently, seeing that whatever it was Wolff found it hard to express the matter on his mind. He was digging his spurred heel into the sand and frowning, not in anger, but with a curious shamefaced embarrassment.

"It's this," he said at last. "You know how it was, Kurt, when we first came here. Of course we did the duty round of visits and so on, and went out in a quiet way, but we kept as clear as we could of the swell affairs. I made my work the excuse, and it was quite an honest excuse, though of course there were other reasons. Now I think it was a mistake. I think, for my own advantage, I ought not to have refused certain invitations—one gets a bad name at head-quarters—or is passed over; and if it were possible I should like to get back on the lists again——"

He stopped short, and Seleneck stared at him in puzzled silence. For the first time he had the opportunity of studying Wolff in a state of thorough confusion.

"Of course, that is easy enough," he said at last. "But all that sort of thing entails heavy expense and——"

"I think the expense justified," Arnim broke in hastily. "I am convinced that a certain outlay—a certain ostentation, if you like—is necessary to a rapid career. And I should be immensely grateful to you if you would help me."

"But your work—and the money?" Seleneck inquired bluntly.

"Both are my affairs," was the quick, irritable answer. The next minute he repented, and held out an apologetic hand. "I don't know what is the matter with me," he said. "I'm not fit companion for a savage. Don't take me seriously, there's a good fellow, and lend me a helping hand this once. I want it badly."

Seleneck shook his head.

"As you have just suggested, you know your own business best," he said gravely, "and I shall certainly do what I can. My uncle, the General Hulson, is giving a ball some time this winter. I and the wife aren't going. We can't afford it. But I daresay I could get you invitations; and once you are in the tide you will be able to swim on for yourselves. All the same"—he laid a kindly hand on Wolff's shoulder—"I can only tell you what you yourself know, that the officer who burns his mental and financial resources at both ends is lost. *Es wäre Schade um dich, alter Junge!*"

Wolff smiled.

"Don't worry," he said. "I shall take care of myself, and, at any rate—thanks for helping me."

The Hussar had by now finished his trial, and Seleneck, with a general salute, hurried out of the barracks. He was a sensitive man who felt a good many things acutely which his brain did not understand, and something in his friend's manner caused him an unexplained distress. He knew that Wolff had changed—his very actions were proof of the fact. It was not like him to part with an animal to which he was attached with the real affection of a good rider for a good horse; it was not like him to seek steps to his advancement in the patronage of his superiors. Wolff had never been a "place-hunter." Whilst always a favourite with those under whom he served, he had not sought their favour by any other means than his ready goodwill and the vigorous, unsparing fulfilment of his duty. And now he was talking of dancing attendance at every general's levee like any common *Streber* for whom all means are good enough so long as the end is attained.

Seleneck sighed as he hurried homewards. Yes, the change in his friend was there right enough, and it had left its trace on the man's whole bearing. He had been neither as frank nor as cheery nor as self-confident as was his wont, and there had been a grim determination in his voice and manner which warned against all interference. Above all things, no laughter and forced good spirits had concealed the fact that he was not at his ease. His whole newly born gravity had borne more the stamp of the stiff-lipped recklessness of an adventurer than the sober determination of a good soldier seeking a short cut to success; and Seleneck, who felt for Wolff an ungrudging admiration, boded no good for the future if the change continued. "I have seen a few dozen fellows go like that," he thought to himself, "and it has always ended in breakdown. Only in their case it was horses or cards, and I'll wager that neither play any part in Wolff's trouble. I wonder what the devil is the matter?"

He was still wondering when he reached home, after an unusually tedious and disagreeable walk. More than once he had been tempted to take the tram, in order to be quicker home to Elsa and the comfort of shifting on to her willing shoulders the burden of his doubts; but the consideration of expense held him back. After all, trams become too easily a habit. Two trams a day cost 20 pf. and six days amount to 1.20, and 1.30 will buy a bottle of Landwein good enough for the little "evenings" which one is bound to give if one is a good comrade. So Freiherr von Seleneck had walked, and those who had observed him had envied the immaculate uniform and the lordly bearing, making no guess at the empty pockets of the one and the entire innocence of the other. For lordliness and Seleneck were unknown to each other; and if he bore himself with a certain unconscious assertiveness, it was because he wore the King's uniform, and not in the least because he thought himself a great man.

Somewhat to his surprise and disappointment, his wife was not at the door to receive him when he arrived. The *Bursche* who helped him off with his coat told him the *gnädige Frau* had visitors and was in the drawing-room. Thither Seleneck at once repaired. Usually a sociable and hospitable man, he felt he could have dispensed with guests in the one hour of the day when he was certain of his wife's undivided company, but his slight annoyance evaporated as soon as he saw who the visitors were. Nora herself occupied the sofa, and her fair young face, lit by a faint, almost embarrassed, smile of greeting, inspired Seleneck with the brilliant reflection that she had no doubt come to confide the trouble, whatsoever it was, to his wife's sympathetic ears. The hope was immediately dispelled, however, by Frau von Seleneck herself, who drew his attention to the presence of a young man seated at the other end of the room, nursing an elegantly booted foot with the air of profoundest boredom.

"I do not think you have met before," she said. "This is Frau von Arnim's brother—Mr. Ingestre."

Seleneck accepted the languidly outstretched hand with a feeling so akin to alarm that he

caught little more than a general impression of his guest's appearance. It was not often that his good-natured, easy-going wife rose to heights of real indignation, but when she did, the signs of storm were not absent, and he had recognised them all too clearly in the rather high-pitched voice and flushed face. Moreover, he became now acutely aware of a certain strained politeness in the atmosphere which had hitherto been unknown in the relations between the two women. Once he even caught Nora's eyes fixed on his with such an expression of trouble in their depths that he was convinced something unpleasant had happened, and became almost indignant with his Elsa, who firmly refused to allow the conversation to flow in any but the most cold and formal channels. The young man took no part in the talk, halting and spasmodic as it naturally became. He appeared to know no German; and as Seleneck's English was of a limited description, intercourse between them was more or less impossible. Seleneck took the opportunity to study this new arrival, of whom he had indeed heard little that was complimentary; but his cautious survey gave him no great satisfaction. In truth, Berlin and the few weeks of unlimited freedom had not improved Miles. He was, as always, scrupulously dressed and had a certain air of the "man-about-town" which contrasted with his otherwise uneasy and rather boorish manners. It was a little hard to imagine that he had ever held a lieutenant's commission, still harder to believe that he was Nora von Arnim's brother. There was no resemblance between the two, as Seleneck noticed with satisfaction. Miles's face was round and sallow, and he had a peculiar trick of furtively glancing about him which was directly opposed to Nora's frank and at that moment defiant gaze. As a matter of fact, though his critic did not know it, Miles had developed on his father's lines, with the one difference that the Rev. John's habits were those of a naturally nervous and diffident character, whereas Miles, having no nerves to complain of, had still a rooted objection to looking any one in the face. As he sat, alternately staring at the carpet and casting curious, supercilious glances round the poorly furnished drawing-room, Seleneck passed judgment on him.

"You drink, and can't stand it," he thought, and then, remembering Bauer, added, "and probably gamble."

Which proved that Seneleck, though neither a diplomatist nor a strategian, was at least something of a judge of character.

At that moment Nora rose hastily to her feet. The conversation had languished beyond hope of recovery, and, moreover, she had seen something in her host's expression which made her cheeks burn with a curious mixture of shame and anger.

"We must really go," she said nervously. "We have stayed far too long—I hope you will forgive us."

"It is always a pleasure to see you, *gnädige Frau*," Seleneck answered warmly. "You know that your welcome is always waiting you. And that reminds me—we are giving a little dinner next week—quite *entre nous*, you know—and of course it would not be complete without you and Wolff. And your brother"—he turned to Miles with a bow, which was answered by a blank stare —"I hope will do us the honour."

He had spoken with unusual kindness, because he felt that his thoughts at least had not been altogether hospitable, and he had every desire to atone to Nora as far as lay in his power. A cough from Frau von Seleneck warned him that he had instead been guilty of a mysterious *faux pas*. Nora's colour had deepened, and she was playing restlessly with her gloves.

"It's very good of you," she stammered. "Frau von Seleneck has also asked me—it was very kind. Of course I shall tell Wolff, and we will let you know."

The puzzled officer saw a scornful, angry smile pass over his wife's face; and feeling that he was altogether out of his depths, he kissed the extended hand and prepared to show his guests to the door of the flat.

At the general preparations for departure Miles Ingestre awoke from his dreary contemplation of the imitation Turkish carpet and, extricating one hand from his pocket, proffered it all round with signs of sincere relief. Frau von Seleneck bowed and ignored the offer, and her farewell with Nora was marked with a not less striking, if more inexplicable, rigidity.

Five minutes later, when her husband returned from his host's duties, he found her in floods of angry tears.

"*Mein liebes Kind!*" he exclaimed in despair. "Whatever is the matter? Has anything serious happened?"

"I have been insulted in my own house!" the little woman retorted, dabbing her eyes fiercely with a minute pocket-handkerchief. "I should hope that was serious enough!"

"Insulted! By whom?"

"By that—that English creature!"

"Do you mean Frau von Arnim? But, *Menkenkind*!—she is your best friend!"

"She is nothing of the kind. She is a conceited, pretentious, arrogant—oh! I don't know what, but I know I hate her with all my heart. And as for that brother——" With a determined effort she swallowed down a torrent of adjectives and sobbed huskily instead.

Seleneck seated himself on the arm of her chair and patted her on the shoulder.

"Perhaps one day you'll tell me all about it," he suggested, and waited patiently for results.

After a moment, the desire to tell her story overcame the desire to have a good cry, and Frau von Seleneck, leaning her head against her husband and squeezing his hand violently at moments of more than usual indignation, related the incidents which had led up to this climax. It appeared, in the first place, that Nora had arrived at an entirely inopportune moment.

"I was in the middle of making something extra for your supper," Elsa von Seleneck explained. "I shan't tell you what it is, as it is a surprise, and may still turn out all right, though I should think it was very doubtful, because Bertha is such an unutterable fool. At any rate, had it been any one else I should have been very angry, but as it was Nora I didn't mind so much. I told Bertha to bring her into the kitchen, but then she said she had brought her brother with her, so I came out. Well, of course I wasn't as tidy as I might have been, but—look at me, please, Kurt. Is there anything in my appearance to warrant anybody giggling?"

Seleneck looked at his wife gravely. She was very flushed and hot, and there was a suspicion of flour on the tip of her nose, which might have aggravated a ticklish sense of humour; but Seleneck knew better than to say so.

"Certainly not!" he said. "Who dared giggle, pray?"

"That—that boy!" Frau von Seleneck retorted. "Nora looked fearfully upset, and at first I thought she was ashamed of him, but afterwards I knew better—I knew she was ashamed of me!"

"My dear!" her husband protested.

"It's true—perfectly true. You wouldn't have recognised her. You know how sweet she was when she first came—so nice and grateful and simple—I really had quite a *Schwärmerei* for her. Everybody had—they couldn't help it. She won all hearts with her broken German and her girlish, happy ways. Well, to-day she was intolerable—stiff as a poker, my dear, and as disagreeable as a rheumatic old major on half-pay. I couldn't get a friendly word out of her, and all the time I could see her studying my dress and the furniture, as though she were trying to find the prices on them. As for that boy, he went on giggling. Every time I made an English mistake, he sniggered"—the little woman's voice rose with exasperation. "He tried to hide it behind his hand, but of course I saw, and it made me so angry I could have boxed his ears!"

"Pity you didn't," said Seleneck. "*Dummer Junge!*"

"That wasn't the worst. I tried to be friendly. I asked them both to dinner next week—and what do you think? She looked ever so uncomfortable, and said she was very sorry, but she was afraid they could not manage it. I don't know what excuse she meant to give, but that—that boy went and blurted the truth out for her. It appears that he had been to a dinner party last week and had been bored to extinction. At any rate, he said that wild horses, or some such creatures, wouldn't drag him to another business like that, and then he set to work and made fun of everything. My dear, I don't know what dinner it was, but it was exactly like ours will be—exactly, from the soup to the cheese!"

Seleneck pulled his moustache thoughtfully.

"He wasn't to know that," he said in faint excuse.

"But Nora knew, and she never said a word, never even tried to stop him; and when I said that I thought it was very bad manners to make fun of people whose hospitality one had enjoyed, she flared up and said that her brother was English, and that English people had different ways, and couldn't help seeing the funny side of things—she saw them herself!"

Seleneck got up and paced about restlessly. The matter was more serious than he thought, and an instinctive wisdom warned him that for the present at any rate it would be better to keep his troubles about Wolff to himself.

"I wonder what is the matter with them all?" he said at last. "Of course, the brother is simply an ill-behaved cub, but I confess I do not understand Frau von Arnim. She was always so amiable, and everybody thought Wolff the luckiest fellow alive—except myself."

"I can tell you exactly what is the matter," his wife said more calmly and with some shrewdness, "Marriage, after all, doesn't work miracles, and Frau von Arnim is no more German than I am Chinese. She is English right to the core, and at the bottom of everything she despises and hates us and our ways. They are not good enough for her any more, and she wants to go back

to her own life and her own people. It was all right so long as she was alone with Wolff in the first few months. One didn't notice the gulf so much, but now she has her brother to remind her and support her, it will widen and widen. See if what I say is not true!"

"It's a very bad outlook for poor Wolff if it *is* true," Seleneck said gloomily. "He is absolutely devoted to her."

"Nevertheless, it will end badly," his wife answered, preparing to make her departure. "It is I who tell you so. Race and nationality are dividing oceans, and the man who tries to bridge them is a fool, and deserves his fate."

And with these words of wisdom she disappeared into the mysterious region of the kitchen.

## CHAPTER VIII
### RISING SHADOWS

Nora sat by the window and mended stockings. There was not very much light, for although it was still early afternoon and the winter sun stood high in the heavens, very few rays found their way into the fourth-floor rooms of No. 22, Adler Strasse. As Miles had said more than once, it was a poky hole. Nora remembered his words as she worked, and she looked up and studied the tiny apartment with a wondering regret. Yes; it was dark and poky; but why did the fact strike her so clearly and so constantly? Why was she doomed to see everything and everybody with another's eyes? For that was what had happened to her. One short month ago, this place had been her paradise, her own particular little Eden, and now it was a "poky hole"—because Miles had said so and because her common sense told her that he was right. Had, then, the magic which had blinded her against the reality ceased to act its charm—or altogether lost its power? Surely not. Her eyes fell on her husband's writing-table, with its burden of neatly arranged books and papers, and something in her softened to wistful tenderness. In her imagination she saw him sitting there, bent over his work in all-absorbed interest. She saw the thoughtful, knitted brows, the strong white hand guiding the pen through the intricacies of plans and calculations, the keen, searching eyes which were never stern for her, which, if they no longer flashed with the old unshadowed laughter, were always filled with the same unshaken, unaltered love. And she in her turn loved him. That she knew. There, and there alone, her brother's barbed shafts had fallen short, or had broken harmless against the steeled walls of defence. Her husband was still what he had always been—the one and only man who had ever counted in her life. But there was a difference. What the difference was she could not tell. Perhaps just that change had come into her love which had come into his eyes. It was still a great love, still unshaken, but it had lost the power of glorying in itself, of being happy, of rejoicing in its own strength and youth and unity. When Wolff entered the room her pulses quickened, but it was with a curious, inexplicable pain, and when he went away she breathed more easily. That most wonderful and rare of moments when they had thought and felt and lived as though they were one mind, one body, one soul had passed—perhaps for ever. They stood on different shores and looked at each other over the dividing stream with sad eyes of love and hopeless regret.

How had it all come? Whose fault was it? Poor Nora felt she knew. The spectre had risen in the same hour when Miles had leant back in the *Drotschke* and sighed with relief because Wolff had not accompanied them. She had been angry at first, but the rough words had revealed something to her which she would never otherwise have believed, something in herself which had lain dormant and which now awoke, never to rest again. It was not Miles's fault. Had it been, she would not have hesitated to follow her mother's advice. But to have sent him away would be a sign of weakness—and it would be useless. The evil—whatsoever it was—lay in herself. It had always been there, but she had not recognised it. Miles had shown her what she must sooner or later have seen for herself. She had married a stranger from a strange land, and he had remained a stranger, and the land had not become her home. That was the whole matter. That she loved him, that his country had offered her love and welcome did not alter the one great fact that the faintest cry, the faintest call from her own people had drawn from her an irrepressible answer of unchanged allegiance. She loved Wolff, but in every petty conflict between him and her brother her heart had sided against him; she had had a sincere affection for the Selenecks, and in cold blood she knew that Miles had behaved boorishly towards them; but she had grown to hate them because they had shown their disapproval, and because *he* hated them.

In this strange, unseen conflict of influences Miles stood for more than her brother; he stood

for her whole race, for every inborn prejudice and opinion, and his coming had revealed to her her own loneliness. She was alone in a foreign land; she spoke a tongue which was not her tongue; she lived a life in which she was, and must remain, a tolerated stranger. Her seeming compliance had been no more than youth's adaptability to a passing change. Her love and her ready enthusiasm had blinded her, but Miles had torn down the scales from her eyes, and she saw the life she lived as he saw it—as a weary round of dismal pleasures, big sacrifices, endless struggle. She saw that her home was poor and tasteless, that her friends were neither elegant nor interesting, that they had other ideas, other conceptions of things which to Nora were vitally important—that they were, in a word, foreigners to her blood and up-bringing.

It had been a terribly painful awakening, and in her desperate flight from the full realisation of the change in her she had broken through the circle which hedged in her life, and sought her escape on the turbulent sea of another, more gilded society. She had tried to intoxicate herself with the splendour and popularity so easily acquired. The Frau Commerzienrat Bauer had received her with open arms, had showered upon her delicate and sometimes indelicate attentions; she had been fêted at the gorgeous entertainments given in her honour at the over-decorated "palatial residence"; she had seen Miles's expression of contemptuous criticism change for one of admiration, herself surrounded by the adulation of men who, she was told, governed the world's finance; she had heard the Frau Commerzienrat's loud voice proclaim her as "My dear friend, Frau von Arnim"—and at the bottom of her heart she had been nauseated, disgusted, wearied by it all. She had come back to the close and humble quarters of her home with a sweet sense of its inner purity and dignity, with the determination to make it the very centre of her life. And then she had seen her husband's grave—as it seemed to her, reproachful—face, the freezing disapproval of his circle, the mocking satisfaction of her brother; and the momentary peace had gone. She had felt herself an outcast, and, in hot, bitter defiance of the order of things against which she had sinned, had returned thither, where the opium flattery awaited her. But through it all she loved her husband, desperately, sincerely. As she sat there bent over her work, she thought of him in all the glamour of the first days of their happiness, and a tear rolled down her cheek, only to be brushed quickly away as she heard his footstep on the corridor outside.

"How tired he sounds!" she thought, and suddenly an immense pity mingled with the rekindling tenderness, and shone out of her eyes as she rose to greet him, like a reflex from earlier days.

He looked tired to exhaustion. The rim of his helmet had drawn a deep red line across his broad forehead, and there were heavy lines under the eyes. Nevertheless, his whole face lit up as he saw her.

"May I come in, Nora?" he asked, with a glance at his dusty riding-boots. "We have been surveying, and I am not fit for a lady's drawing-room; but if I tiptoed——"

"Of course you may come in," she cried cheerfully, thankful that the light was behind her. "I have been waiting for you, and tea is quite ready. Sit down, and I will bring you a cup."

He obeyed willingly, and followed her with his eyes as she bustled around the room. It was like old times to find her alone, to see her so eager to attend to his wants. When she came to him with his cup he drew her gently down beside him, and she saw that his face was full of tender gratitude.

"You kind little wife!" he said. "It's worth all the fatigue and worry just to come back and be spoilt. What a long time it seems since we were alone and since you 'fussed' over me, as you used to call it."

There was no reproach or complaint in his voice, and yet she felt reproached. She lifted her face to his and kissed him remorsefully.

"Have I neglected you, Wolff?"

"Not a bit, dear. I only meant—of course, one can't go on being newly married for ever, but it has its charm to go back and pretend; hasn't it?"

"You talk as though we had been married for years!" she said in a troubled tone. "And it is scarcely seven months."

"Seven months can be a long time," he answered gravely. "It all depends on what happens."

She had her head against his shoulder, and suddenly, she knew not why nor how, she was transported back to that magic hour when he had first taken her in his arms and an unhoped for, unbelievable happiness had risen above her dark horizon. In a swift-passing flash she realised that this was the man for whom she had fought, who had been everything to her, without whom life had been impossible, and that now he was hers, her very own, and that she had been cruel, unfaithful, and ungrateful. She flung her arms impetuously about his neck and drew his head

down till it rested against her own.

"Oh, Wolff, Wolff!" she cried. "Are you so very disappointed in me? Has it only needed six months to show you what a hopeless little failure I am?"

"You—a failure?" He passed his hand gently over her hair. "You could never be a failure, and I should be an ungrateful fellow to talk of 'disappointment.' You are just everything I thought and loved, my English Nora."

The name aroused her, startled her even. Was it only because it emphasised what had already passed unspoken through her mind, or was it because it seemed to have a pointed significance, perhaps an intended significance?

"Why do you call me 'English Nora'?" she asked, with an unsteady laugh. "I am not English any more. I am your wife, Wolff, and you are *ein guter Deutscher*, as you say."

He nodded, his eyes fixed thoughtfully in front of him.

"Yes, I am German, bone and blood," he said. "That's true enough. And you are my wife. I wonder, though——"

He stopped, and then suddenly he bent and lifted her like a child in his arms and carried her to the big chair opposite.

"Now I can see you better," he said quietly. "I want to ask you something which your face will tell me better than your words."

He had fallen on one knee beside her and was looking her earnestly in the eyes. She bore his scrutiny, but only with a strong effort of the will. She felt that he was looking straight into the secret places of her heart, that he was reading the pain that her words, "I am not English any more," had caused her and how little they were true.

"Tell me," he said, "are you happy, Nora? Are you not the one who is disappointed?"

"I? Wolff, how should I be? how could I be?"

"All too easily—sometimes I think inevitably. I am not blind, Nora. I see how petty and small your life must be compared to what you perhaps thought—to what might have been. The people you meet are accustomed to it all—at least they have learnt to make the best of what little they have; but you have come from another world and another life. You are accustomed to breadth and light and freedom. You have never known this brilliant poverty which we know so well, and it is hard on you—too hard on you. I have never seen it all so clearly as I see it now. If I had seen it then I would have trampled my love for you underfoot rather than have asked so great a sacrifice. But I was blinded—I did not understand——"

"Wolff, have I complained? Have I been so ungrateful—so wicked?"

"No, Nora. You have been very brave and good, but I have seen, and I have reproached myself bitterly—terribly. When I came in to-night and saw that you had been crying, I felt that I would do anything—that I would give you up——"

He stopped short, and with a pang of indescribable pain she felt that this soldier kneeling at her feet was fighting for his voice, that his quick, broken sentences had been the outburst of a long-suppressed and bitter struggle.

"I love you, Nora," he stammered roughly. "I love you with my life and soul and body, but if your happiness required it I would give you up—to your people——"

"Wolff!" she interrupted passionately.

"Listen, dear. I am not talking at random. I have thought it all over. If I cannot make you happy, I will not make you unhappy. I will do everything a man can do to atone for the one great wrong. Only tell me, whilst I have the strength to part with you——"

He stopped again, and she felt that he was trembling. There was something infinitely pathetic in his weakness, something which called to life not only her love for him as her husband but a wealth of a new and wonderful tenderness such as a mother might feel for a suffering child. She put her arms about him and drew his head against her breast. For that moment she forgot everything save that he was miserable and that she had made him so.

"I will never leave you of my free will," she said. "Never! You will have to chase me away, and then I shall come and sit on the doorstep and wait for you to let me in. Oh, Wolff, my dearest, what foolish things have you been thinking, and how long have you been brooding over them? Don't you know that I could not live without you?"

He lifted his face, searching hers with keen, hungry eyes, in which she read doubt and a dawning hope.

"Is that true, Nora?"

"Yes; it is true!"

"Be honest with me. Am I so much to you that you can be happy with me—with my people and

in my home and country?"

He had asked the question which she had asked herself in moments of pitiless self-examination, but, like her, he asked it too late. She answered now earnestly, passionately, swept beyond all selfish considerations on a tide of deep, sincere feeling.

"Yes, I love you enough, Wolff. And if there have been any regrets, any longings which have caused you pain, forgive them, my husband—above all, understand them. They will pass—they must pass, because, at the bottom, you are my all in all."

He made no answer. He lifted her hand to his lips, and in the movement there was a joy, a gratitude deeper than words could have expressed. She felt that she had satisfied him, and she, too, felt satisfied.

Thus they sat silent together, hand clasped in hand, his head against her shoulder, whilst peace and a new happiness seemed to creep in about them with the evening shadows. And in her young hope and confidence Nora believed in this new happiness as she had believed in the old. It seemed so strong, so invulnerable, the obstacles so petty, so mean. They had been swept aside in a moment, like sand-castles before the onrush of the sea, so that it seemed impossible, absurd, that she could ever have thought of them as insurmountable. And yet, though heart and mind believed in the change, another wider, less definable sense, which we call instinct, remained doubtful and fearful. It was the one sign that all was not as it had once been, that they had only outwardly regained the past. Once they had lived for the future, longing for it in their extravagant youth as for a time which must reveal to them new wonders and joys. Now they clung anxiously to the present, scarcely daring to move or speak lest the peace, the outward semblance of unity, should be destroyed. Thus they sat silent together, each apparently plunged in his own untroubled reflections, each in reality fighting back thought as an enemy who might overshadow their victory.

It was Arnim who at last spoke. He drew two letters from his pocket and gave them to her.

"The postman met me on the stairs," he said. "One is a disappointment and the other the fulfilment of a wish. Which will you have first?"

"The disappointment," she said, turning over the letters anxiously. "I always keep the *bonne bouche* for the last. But it has grown so dark that I cannot see. You must tell me what is in both."

"The one is from Aunt Magda," he answered. "It seems that the doctor has ordered Hildegarde a longer trial of the baths at Baden-Baden, so that their coming will be postponed a week or two at least. I am very sorry. I had looked forward to the time when you would have them—to help you."

It was the one faint intimation that he knew that she still needed help and that all had not gone well in the short period of their married life. Nora's face fell. Her very real disappointment proved to her how much she had longed for the two women who had always been her friends, even in the darkest hours. She loved them as mother and sister. She had never felt for them the antipathy, the enmity which had grown up between her and the Selenecks, and, in lesser degrees, between her and all the other women of her husband's circle, and she had longed for them as for a refuge from her increasing isolation. And now they were not coming—or, at least, not for some weeks. She was to be left alone among these strangers, these foreigners, with only Miles to support and uphold her. Only Miles? She remembered her husband with a pang of the old remorse, and she bent and kissed him as though to atone for some unintentional wrong.

"I am sorry they are not coming," she said; "but perhaps the baths will do Hildegarde good, and as for me—why, have I not got my husband to turn to?"

Wolff laughed happily.

"After that pretty speech, I must hold out some reward, so that the practice may be encouraged," he said, waving the second letter in triumph. "Behold! His Excellency General von Hulson has done himself the honour to invite his future colleague, the Captain von Arnim, *nebst* his beautiful *Gemählin* and honourable brother-in-law, to a ball on the 17th of next month. Now, are you satisfied?"

"How good you are to me, dear!" She kissed him, guiltily conscious that her joy had been but a poor feigning. Now, for the first time, she realised clearly how far she had drifted from her husband's circle. She shrank from that which had once been the goal of her ambition. Wolff laughed at her, mistaking the cause of her hesitation.

"Verily, I am growing to be a wise husband!" he said gaily. "Are all the fine dresses worn out, that my wife's fair face should be so overcast? Well, there! Is that enough to cover future expenses, Vanity?"

He had pressed a little bundle of paper-money into her hand, and she looked at it, dazed with

surprise. She did not know that it was Bruno's price which he had given her, but again her eyes filled. She pitied him in that moment more than herself.

"You dear, generous fellow!" she stammered mechanically.

"It's not generosity, little woman. It's only right that you should have change and gaiety. You must not think that I do not understand how dull and dreary it must sometimes be. I do understand—it goads me sometimes to think how little I can do. Perhaps one day it will all be better—when I am Field-Marshal, you know!"

He tried to laugh, but somehow a certain weariness rang through his laughter. She heard it, and remorse mingled with her pity.

"You must not worry about all that," she said gently. "I must be a poor kind of wife if I am not satisfied as I am." She repeated her words to herself, and felt that there was bitter truth in them.

For a moment Wolff remained silent. She thought he was resting, but presently he spoke again, and she knew that he had been preparing himself to approach a graver subject.

"Nora, there is something I want you to do for me, something I want you to promise."

She looked anxiously down into his face.

"What is it, dear?"

"I want you to associate less with Bauer—and with Bauer's relations."

"Why?"

The one word sounded a defiance. Wolff rose from his kneeling position and stood at her side, his hand resting gently on her shoulder.

"Because he is a man I do not trust. It is not my way to speak against a comrade or to accuse lightly, but I have sure reason for asking what I do of you. No man and no woman is the better for Bauer's friendship."

"Does that mean that you do not trust me?"

She was angry now—without just cause or reason, simply because she saw in him the embodiment of all the prejudices of the class which had dared to look askance at her. A grave smile passed over her husband's face.

"You know I trust you, Nora; but in our position we must avoid even the appearance of evil. Not so much as a breath of scandal must tarnish my wife's name."

"Ah, '*your* wife'!" she said bitterly.

"——who is myself," he added.

There was a moment's silence before he went on:

"It is not only of you I was thinking, Nora. There is Miles to be considered. He is very young, and possibly easily influenced. No one can tell into what difficulties—what temptations he might be led by unscrupulous hands. Surely you sympathise with me in this?"

"My brother is no more likely to act dishonourably than myself," she answered, and again it was her race rather than Miles that she defended. "Nor do I believe Captain Bauer to be the man you describe. He has been very kind to me, and I know to what influence I must ascribe your prejudices. The Selenecks have always hated my—my friendship with the Bauers. No doubt they told you that the Commerzienrat has stolen his wealth."

She regretted her words as soon as they had been spoken. In her angry conviction that her conduct had been criticised—perhaps justly criticised—she had allowed herself to say more than she had meant, more even than she believed to be true.

"You are not just to me, Nora," Wolff answered quietly. "I have said nothing against the Bauers—I know nothing against them. But they are very rich, and it is their wealth which makes your association with them undesirable. We are poor—our friends are poor. We cannot entertain as they do. And we belong to another class—not a better class, perhaps, but one with other aims and other ideals. You cannot belong to both."

"At the bottom, you do think your class superior," Nora interposed scornfully.

"Perhaps I do—perhaps you do, when you are honest with yourself, dear. You must know that the Bauers' friendship for you is not wholly disinterested. It sounds rather brutal; but those sort of people who talk of money as the one thing that counts and pretend to scorn family and titles are just those who are most anxious to have a titled name among their visitors."

Nora started as though she had been stung.

"I think you overestimate your—our importance," she said.

He did not retort. He simply held out his hands to her.

"Nora, you can't think it gives me pleasure to spoil anything for you. Won't you trust me? Won't you give me your promise?"

She looked at him; she was honest enough to acknowledge to herself that he had been right,

but above all, his patience, his quiet tone of pleading had moved and softened her.

"I give you my promise, Wolff."

"Thank you, dear. Goodness knows, I will try and make it up to you in all I can."

He kissed her, and then suddenly she drew away from him.

"You don't need to make up for it. And I think, after all, I won't go to the Hulsons."

He looked at her in blank surprise. He had sold his favourite horse to satisfy her needs, he had humbled his pride, laid himself open to the accusation of being a "place-hunter" in order to be able to lead her into the brilliant world after which she had once craved, and now that the sacrifices had been brought she would have none of them. He did not understand—as how should he have done?—that she saw in his action an attempt to bribe her, in his gift a sweetmeat offered to a disappointed child. He felt, instead—though he would not have admitted it even in his thoughts—that she had been capricious, inconsiderate.

He turned away and went over to the writing-table, throwing down the two letters with a gesture of weariness.

"We must go now, whether we want to or not," he said. "I have worried for the invitation, and it is impossible to refuse. The Selenecks would have every right to be offended."

"They are that already," Nora said bitterly.

"Perhaps they have some reason to be, dear." He spoke quietly, but he had implied that the fault was hers, and the angry blood rushed to her cheeks.

"The Selenecks are absurd and ridiculously sensitive," she said. "They have chosen to take offence at nothing, and——"

"Nora, they are my best friends!"

"Is that any reason why they should be mine?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And if I do not like them—if I find their manners and ways too different to mine—what then?"

There was a faint sneer in tone and look which was intentional, and which she knew was undeserved, but she could not help herself. She hated the Selenecks and the whole crowd of small military nobodies struggling for advancement and their daily bread. Why should she be forced to live her life amongst them?

Wolff made no answer to her question. He was sufficiently calm to feel with its full poignancy how fleeting and unstable their newly won happiness had been. The barrier was raised again—the more formidable because it had been once so easily overcome. Yet, with the tenacity of despair he clung to the appearance of things, and kept his teeth tight-clenched upon an angry, bitter retort. He was spared all further temptation. The door-bell rang, and he turned to Nora with a quiet question as though nothing had happened.

"Is that Miles, or is he at home?"

"It is Miles, probably. He has been out all the afternoon."

She, too, had recovered her self-possession and was grateful to him for having ignored her outburst. Nevertheless she knew that he would not forget, any more than she would be able to do.

"Where has he been, do you know?"

"I am not sure. He found it very dull here, and went out with some English friends he has picked up. Is there any harm in that?"

Again the same note of sneering defiance! Wolff kept his face steadily averted.

"Not so far. But I do not like his English friends."

"I suppose not," she retorted. "Everybody here hates us."

"Us——?" He turned at last and looked at her.

"——the English, I mean," she stammered.

He had no opportunity to reply. The door opened, and their little maid-of-all-work entered, bearing a card.

"A gentleman to see the *gnädige Frau*," she said. "Shall I show him in?"

Nora took the card. She looked at it a long time. Even in the half-darkness her pallor was so intense that it caught Wolff's attention. He saw her stretch out her hand blindly as though seeking support.

"What is it? What is the matter?" he asked.

She lifted her eyes to his, staringly, stupidly. He felt that she hardly saw him.

"Nothing—it is an old friend—from England."

The sound of her own voice seemed to bring her to her senses. She handed him the card, and her manner from stunned bewilderment changed to something that was intensely defiant. There

was a moment's silence. Then Arnim turned to the waiting servant.

"Show him in here," he ordered.

"Wolff—how do you know I wish to see him?"

"An old friend—who has come so far to see you? You surely cannot do otherwise. Besides, why should you not want to see him?"

He looked at her in steady surprise, so that the suspicion which for one moment had flashed up in her mind died down as quickly as it had come. *He did not know—he could not know*. But the consciousness of coming disaster weighed upon her like a crushing burden.

"There is no reason. Only I thought you might not wish it."

"Your friends are my friends," he answered gravely.

And then the door opened a second time, and Robert Arnold stood on the threshold.

## CHAPTER IX
### ARNOLD RECEIVES HIS EXPLANATION

A great physical change had come over him in the few months of his absence. He was pale and gaunt-looking, as though he had but lately risen from a serious illness, and his eyes, which fell at once on Nora's face, were hollow and heavily underlined.

Nora noticed these details with the sort of mechanical minuteness of a mind too stunned to grasp the full magnitude of the situation. One side of her intellect kept on repeating: "Why has he come? Why has he come?" whilst the other was engrossed in a trivial catalogue of the changes in his appearance. "He stoops more—he is thinner," she thought, but she could not rouse herself to action. Arnold, indeed, gave her little opportunity. After the first moment's hesitation he advanced and held out his hand.

"I ought to have let you know of my coming, Nora," he said, "but I could not wait. I have just arrived in Berlin, and of course my first visit had to be to you. I hope I have not chosen an inconvenient time?"

He was trying to speak conventionally, and was successful, insomuch that Nora understood that she had at present nothing to fear from him. Not that she felt any fear now that the first shock was over. It was with a certain dignity and resolution that she looked from one man to the other.

"This is my husband, Robert," she said, "and this, Wolff, is my old playfellow, Captain Arnold."

Wolff held out his hand frankly.

"I am glad to meet you," he said. "I am glad for my wife's sake when she has the chance of seeing her old friends. I hope, therefore, that your stay in Berlin is to be a long one?"

Arnold bowed.

"I am on my way home to England," he said. "How long I remain depends on circumstances."

"May the circumstances be favourable, then!" Wolff returned. His tone was warm—almost anxiously friendly, and Nora looked at him in surprise and gratitude. His smiling face betrayed no sign of the devil which he had grappled with and overcome in one short moment of struggle. He nodded cheerfully at her.

"I am afraid you must play hostess alone for a little, dear," he said. "Captain Arnold, as a soldier you will understand that duty can't be neglected, and you will excuse me. I have no doubt you will have a great deal to talk about, and at supper-time I shall hope to have the pleasure of meeting you again. Whilst you are in Berlin you must consider this your *pied-à-terre*."

"You are very kind," Arnold stammered. Like Nora, he too was impressed—uncomfortably impressed—by the impetuous hospitality with which Wolff greeted him. Like Nora, also, he had no means of knowing that it was the natural revolt of a generous nature from the temptings of jealousy and suspicion.

Wolff had lighted a small lamp, which he carried with him to the door, together with a bundle of documents. For a moment he hesitated, looking back at Nora, and the light thrown up into his face revealed an expression of more than usual tenderness.

"Don't talk yourself tired, Frauchen," he said as he went out.

Nora smiled mechanically. She had had the feeling that the words were nothing, that he had tried to convey an unspoken message to her which she had neither understood nor answered. She gave herself no time to think over it. She switched on the electric light, and turned to Arnold, who was still standing watching her.

"Sit down, Robert," she said. "As Wolff said, we have a great deal to say to each other—at least, I fancy you have come because you have a great deal to say to me."

Her words contained a slight challenge, which, the next moment, she felt had been out of place. Arnold sank down in the chair nearest to hand. It was as though he had hitherto been acting a part, and now let the mask fall from a face full of weary hopelessness.

"You are right," he said. "I have something to say, Nora—I suppose, though, I ought to call you Frau von Arnim?"

"You ought," she answered, irritated by his tone. "But it does not matter. I don't think Wolff minded."

A grim smile passed over Arnold's lips.

"Wolff seems a good-natured sort of fellow," he said. There was again something disparaging in his tone which brought the colour to Nora's cheeks.

"He is everything I could wish," she answered proudly. And then the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes reminded her that she had done this man a cruel injury, and her heart softened with pity and remorse.

"How pale and thin you have grown!" she exclaimed. "Have you been ill?"

"Very ill," he answered. "I caught some swamp fever or other out there in the wilds, and it was months before they could get me back to the coast. That is why you never heard from me. As soon as I reached port I set straight off for home—to you."

"To me——!" she repeated blankly.

He nodded.

"Yes; to the woman I believed was to be my wife."

"Then you never got my second letter?"

"Did you write a second letter?"

He was looking her earnestly in the eyes, and there was a stifled, tragic wretchedness in his own which was terrible to look on.

"I wrote and explained everything," Nora, answered, controlling her voice with an effort. "I have behaved badly to you, but not so badly as to leave you undeceived."

"You sent me an explanation," he said slowly. "Nora, it is that explanation which I have come to seek. When I first heard of your marriage, I made up my mind that you were not worth suffering for. I thought that I would go back to the forest and forget you—if I could. I meant never to see you again—I felt I could not bear it. But, Nora, a man's love is not only a selfish desire for possession. If he loves truly, he puts into that love something of himself which is a vital part of his life and being—his ideals and his whole trust. I suffered—not only because I had lost you, but because I had lost my faith in every one. You seemed so good and true, Nora. I felt I could never trust another woman again. That was unbearable. For my own sake I had to come and ask you—if you could explain."

He stopped abruptly, and there was a little silence. He had spoken without passion, simply in that weary monotone of those who have risen from great physical or mental suffering; and Nora's heart ached with the knowledge that she alone had brought this ruin upon him.

"You said, 'When I first heard of your marriage,'" she began at last. "When and how was that?"

"From Frau von Arnim," he answered. "I thought you might still be with her at Karlsburg, and the place lay on my route. It was Frau von Arnim who told me."

"Then—she knows everything?"

He saw the alarm on her face.

"As much as I know. Forgive me, Nora; it was inevitable—I could not believe what she told me. I am the more sorry because she is a hard, cold woman who will make trouble. That is another reason why I have come. I wanted to warn you."

Nora made a quick gesture—half of dissent, half of doubt.

"You misjudge her," she said. "She will forgive and understand, as you must. Oh, Robert, it makes me miserable to think I have caused you so much pain, but if I had to live my life again I could not have acted otherwise than I did!"

Her voice had grown firmer, and as she spoke she turned from her position by the window and faced him with quiet confidence.

"I acted for what I believed to be the best, Robert," she said. "It was perhaps wrong what I did, but I did not mean it to be—I meant to be just and honourable. But I was not strong enough. That was my one fault."

Her clear, earnest tones brought back the light to the tired eyes that watched her.

"I am glad," he said. "I am glad that you can explain. That is all I have come for, Nora—to hear from your own lips that you are not ashamed."

"I am not ashamed," she answered steadily. And then, in a few quick sentences she told him everything that had led up to that final moment when Wolff had taken her in his arms and the whole world had been forgotten. As she spoke, the past revived before her own eyes, and she felt again a faint vibration of that happiness which had once seemed immortal, indestructible.

"I did not deceive you," she said at last, with convincing sincerity. "I wrote and told you that I would marry you—not that I loved you. I knew I did not love you, because my love was given elsewhere. I loved Wolff already then, but there was a barrier between us which I believed to be insurmountable. I consented to become your wife because it seemed the best and safest thing to do. Afterwards—it was almost immediately afterwards—the barrier proved unavailing against our love, and I forgot you. That is the brutal truth. I forgot you until it was too late, because, you see, I did not feel more for you than friendship, and because I really loved. That was weak, no doubt, but I had never loved before, and it was too strong for me. A wiser woman would have waited until she was free. She would have written to you and told you that it was all a mistake. I wrote to you afterwards. That is the only difference. The letter did not reach you, and you believed the worst of me. It was only natural, and I know I am to blame, but oh! if you really love, surely you can understand?"

He smiled at her unconscious cruelty, and, rising, took the outstretched hands in his.

"I do understand," he said, "and the blame is all mine. I should never have accepted your generous gift of yourself without your love. I might have known that it would end badly. But you were so young, dear. I thought I should be able to teach you to love. Well, some one else was cleverer and had a better chance, perhaps, than I had. I have no right to blame, nor do you need to feel any remorse on my account. The worst wound is healed now that I can understand. My one prayer is that you may be very, very happy." He studied her upturned face. "You are happy, aren't you, Nora?"

For the shortest part of a minute she wavered. She repeated the question to herself and wondered.

"Yes, of course I am happy," she replied almost impatiently. "Why should I not be?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I am over-anxious for you. You see"—his faint smile betrayed how deep his emotion was, in spite of all self-control—"I still love you."

"I am glad," she answered frankly. "I care for you too, Robert, quite enough to make me very sad if I should lose your regard. It made me miserable to think that you probably hated and despised me."

"I never did that, though I believe I tried," he said. "And now that I may not give you my love, I may at least feel that I am your friend? Grant me that much, Nora. It is very little that I ask—your trust and friendship."

It was indeed very little that he asked, and he had been more generous to her than she could have ever dared to hope. And yet she hesitated.

"Nora!" he cried "Surely I have not deserved to lose everything!"

He was pleading as a beggar might have pleaded for the crumbs beneath the table, and all that was generous in her responded. The hesitation, the vague uneasiness passed. She gave him her hand.

"Of course! We have always been friends—we must always be friends."

"Thank you, dear. That is a great deal to me. No other woman will ever come into my life."

"Don't!" she exclaimed, painfully moved. "You make me feel that I have spoilt your life."

"But you haven't, Nora. You are just the only woman I could ever have loved, and if I had not met you I should be even lonelier than I am. At least I have your friendship."

His tone was composed, almost cheerful, but she felt that he was at the end of his strength, and when, after a quick pressure of the hand, he went towards the door, she made no effort to recall him. Her own voice was strangled, and perhaps her face revealed more than she knew, more than she was actually conscious of feeling—a regret, an appeal, an almost childish loneliness. As though answering an unexpected cry of pain, he turned suddenly and looked at her. He saw the all-betraying tears, and the next minute he had come back to her side and had taken her hands and kissed them.

"You must not!" he said gently. "You are to be happy—as I am. Forgive me; it is the seal upon our friendship—and a farewell."

She had not resisted. She would have forgiven him, because she understood; she would have put the moment's surrender to passion from her memory as something pardoned, but fate took

the power of forgiving and forgetting from her. For the door had opened, and Miles stood on the threshold, watching them with an expression of blank amazement on his flushed, excited face.

Arnold turned, too late conscious that they were not alone, and Miles's amazement changed to a loud delight.

"If it isn't old Arnold!" he exclaimed, flinging coat and hat on to the nearest chair and stretching out an unsteady hand. "Why, we thought you were dead and buried in some African wilderness, didn't we, Nora?"

"You were not far wrong, then," Arnold answered. "I was pretty well done for once, and am only just beginning to feel that I really belong to this world again." He had recovered his self-possession with an effort, and he went on quickly, almost as though he were afraid of Miles's next words: "I was on my way home, and took Berlin as a break. Of course I had to come and see you all."

Miles nodded.

"Decent of you," he said thickly. "Nora will be glad to have you in this foreign hole. It's a sickening shame——" He stumbled and reeled up against Arnold with an impatient curse. The momentary excitement over the unexpected arrival had passed, leaving him bemuddled, in a dull but unmistakable state of intoxication. Arnold took him by the arm and helped him to the nearest chair.

"You are a young fool," he said good-naturedly. "German beer isn't so harmless as you seem to think. What have you been doing with yourself?"

Miles passed his hand over his forehead with a helpless movement, as though he were awakening from a dream.

"It's not the drink," he stammered. "It's not the drink, I tell you. It's—it's the money. I'm in a devil of a mess. These dirty foreigners——"

"Oh, hush!" Nora cried. For the moment disgust and anger had passed. She had heard Wolff's footstep in the adjoining room, and a sudden terror had come over her. "Robert, take him away—quick! And come back afterwards—Wolff may not ask for him whilst you are here. Oh, help me!"

Arnold nodded silently. He lifted the hapless Miles and half dragged, half carried him from the room. He had no thought as yet of the future. It had been revealed to him in a flash that all was not well in Nora's life; he had seen something like despair in her face, and knew that she needed the strong hand of a friend.

"And I am that—nothing else," he thought as he closed Miles's door behind him. "No one can blame me if I claim the rights of friendship and help her—no one!"

But Captain Robert Arnold, sure of his own honour, forgot that the world, being less honourable, might also be of another opinion.

## CHAPTER X
### NEMESIS

It was her at-home day. As she sat there, with her hands clasped listlessly on her lap, it seemed as though in imagination she saw the ghosts of other days arise—days where the little room had been crowded with eager, chattering friends who had come to tell her and each other the latest news of their servants, their husbands or the service, or to be "intellectual," as the case might be. She thought she saw Frau von Seleneck seated on the sofa opposite her, her round, rosy face bright with an irrepressible optimism; she thought she heard the rich, contented chuckle, and felt the maternal pat upon her arm. Then her vision cleared, and the ghosts vanished. The little room was empty of all but shadows, and she was alone.

Presently the door of her husband's study opened. She heard him come towards her, and knew that he was standing at her side; but she did not look up. She felt for the moment too listless, too weary, above all too proud to let him see how deeply her new isolation wounded her.

"All alone, dear?"

"Yes, all alone."

"I thought it was your at-home day?"

She tried to laugh.

"Yes, so it is. But no one has come, you see."

"How is that?"

Then she looked up at him.

"You know quite well. Everybody hates me."

"Nora! That is not true."

She nodded.

"It is quite true. The Selenecks have taken care that none of my misdeeds should go forgotten. They can't forgive my—my intimacy with other people, or my nationality."

"Your nationality?"

She got up with an impetuous, angry movement.

"Yes, my nationality."

He stood looking at her. A new expression had come into his grave face—an expression of sudden understanding, of indescribable pain. Then he came towards her and put his arm about her shoulders.

"My little wife, don't, for God's sake, don't let that come between us! Be brave, fight it down. It will only be for a time. Our—my people are easily hurt. They think, perhaps, you despise them for their sober ways—that they are not good enough for you. Be kind to them, and they will come back. They would forgive you anything."

She drew back from him.

"I do not want their forgiveness. I do not want them. I am happiest alone."

He made no answer, but went slowly towards the door. She knew that she had hurt him, and in her bitterness and wounded pride it gave her a painful satisfaction to know that he too suffered. Yet she loved him; she knew, as he stood there with bent head, that she would give her life for him—only she could not surrender herself, her individuality, the old ties of blood and instinct. She could not, would not break down the barrier which her race built between them. She was too proud, perhaps too hurt to try.

Suddenly Arnim looked up. His features were quiet and composed, and the gathering twilight hid the expression in his eyes.

"Nora, where is Miles?"

"Still in bed. He—he is not feeling well."

"The effects of yesterday?" He laughed grimly. "It seems to me, dear, that your brother would be the better for some occupation—in his own country."

"You wish him to go?"

He met her challenge with an unfaltering determination that was yet mingled with tenderness and pity.

"I think it better—before it is too late."

"What do you mean?"

"Before he ruins himself—or us."

"Wolff, you are not fair. You are unjust."

He smiled sadly.

"I hope I am. Good-bye, little woman. I shall try and be back early. But perhaps Arnold will come—and then you will not be alone."

He went out, closing the door quietly behind him. The protest died on her lips; an icy sense of isolation crept over her, obliterating for the moment all thought of his injustice, of the slight which he had cast upon her brother. In her sudden weakness she held out her arms towards the closed door and called his name, feebly, like a frightened child crying in the dark. But he did not come back. She heard his spurs jingle with a mocking cheerfulness—and then silence. So she went back to her place by the window and sat there, holding back with a pitiful pride the tears that burnt her eyes.

Presently the door opened again. She thought he had come back, and with all her pride her heart beat faster with a momentary, reasonless hope. Then she heard the click of the electric light and a man's voice speaking to her.

"*Gnädige Frau*, may I come in?"

She sprang to her feet as though the voice had been a blow, and saw Bauer standing on the threshold, bowing, a curious half-ironical smile playing about his mouth. For the moment she could neither think nor speak, but out of the depths of her consciousness arose the old aversion, the old instinctive dread. She knew then, warned by that same occult power, that the time had come when the dread should receive its justification.

"I found the door open, and ventured to enter unannounced," Bauer went on calmly. "I knew from experience that the usual formalities would lead to no result. You have been 'out' a great deal of late, *gnädige Frau*." He came towards her without hesitation, and, taking her passive hand, kissed it. "Am I forgiven?"

His absolute ease of manner checked the rise of her indignation. She felt herself strangely helpless. Yet her dignity—her dignity as Wolff's wife—came to her rescue. She looked steadily into the still smiling face.

"If I have been often out, it has not been a mere chance, Herr Rittmeister," she answered. "It has been of intention—an intention which you would have been wiser to respect."

"I see no good reason why I should respect your husband's 'intentions,' *gnädige Frau*," he retorted calmly.

"My husband's wishes are mine."

"Really?" He laughed, and then grew suddenly serious. "In any case, it seems to me that I—we have a right to some sort of an explanation. To put it baldly—there was a time when it pleased you to accept my sister-in-law's hospitality and friendship. Now, it seems, neither she nor I are good enough for you."

Nora flinched involuntarily. She knew that the reproach was a just one, but she knew too that Wolff had been right and only she to blame. Instinct again warned her. She saw danger in this man's cold eyes, in which there yet flickered the light of some controlled passion either of hatred or some other feeling to which she dared give no name.

"You have a right to an explanation," she said at last, with an effort controlling her unsteady voice. "Indeed, I owe you more than that—I owe you an apology. It was a mistake for me to enter into a circle to which I did not belong; only you will do me the justice to remember that it was a mistake not altogether of my making."

"*Gott, gnädige Frau!*" He laughed angrily. "You talk as though we were the dirt under your feet. Is it your husband's petty nobility which gives you the right to look at me like that? I too wear the King's uniform—that is a point which you would do well to remember."

"I have not forgotten it. And there is no question of contempt—I feel myself, Heaven knows, superior to no one; but I repeat, it was a mistake to accept kindness which could not be returned. Surely you can understand——" She crushed down her pride, and in the effort her bearing became prouder and colder. "We are poor, Herr Rittmeister, your relations are rich and live as we cannot live. That alone is a barrier between us."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"An excuse, *gnädige Frau*, an excuse! I know the opinions of your husband's class too well not to know perfectly what you prefer not to tell me. In any case, your considerations are a little belated. You should have thought of all that before you allowed your brother to enter into a circle"—he echoed her words with a kind of mocking satisfaction—"in which he could not sustain his position."

Nora started. She knew now that there was a menace in this man's looks and words. She understood that he would never have acted as he had done without the sure conviction that the power was in his hands. What that power was she did not know—she only knew that she was afraid.

"Sit down, *gnädige Frau*," he went on more calmly. "You look pale, and I have something of importance to tell you. But before everything, I want you to believe that I come to you as your friend."

He motioned her to be seated in the chair which he had pushed towards her, and she obeyed him passively. A sharply defined recollection of their first meeting came back to her as she did so. Then, too, he had acted with the insolent assurance of a man who knows himself master of the situation; but then she had had the power of her independence. Now she felt herself bound, helpless in the bonds of circumstance—and her own folly.

"It is of your brother I have come to speak," Bauer went on, taking his place before her. "Nothing should prove my friendship better than the fact that I have come in spite of the rebuff to which I knew I should lay myself open. But I could not see the crisis break over you without a word of warning—without offering you a helping hand."

She looked at him in mingled astonishment and anger. His familiarity was more terrible to her than his previous tone of menacing resentment.

"I do not understand you," she said coldly.

"Perhaps not. But you must surely be aware that your brother has not been living the most austere of lives since his arrival in Berlin. It may be that I am a little to blame. I thought by the way he talked that he could well afford it, and encouraged him to share my life with me. Well, it appears now that he bragged more than circumstances justified. I do not speak of the money he owes me nor his gambling-debts to my friends. Those I have already paid. It was not pleasant for me to be associated with a defaulting gambler, and what I did I did for my own sake. I ask no

thanks or credit for it. But there are other matters." He had undone the buttons of his military coat, and drew out a folded sheet of paper, which he laid before her. "That is a rough list of your brother's creditors, with the amounts attached," he said. "You will see for yourself that he has understood the art of amusing himself."

She took the list from him. The figures swam before her eyes and she fought against a deadly faintness. From afar off she heard Bauer's voice roll on with the unchanged calm of a lawyer for whom the matter had only a professional interest.

"At the bottom you will see the sum-total, *gnädige Frau*. It runs into three figures, and it is possible that my list is not complete. The worst of it is that your husband will be held responsible. The credit would never have been given to Mr. Ingestre if his brother-in-law had not been Herr von Arnim, captain on the general staff."

Nora rose unsteadily to her feet.

"It is impossible," she stammered incoherently. "I know—Wolff hasn't the money—it is impossible. Oh, how could he have been so foolish—so wicked!" And it was curious that in that moment she thought less of the ruin which was bearing down upon her husband than of the disgrace which had fallen upon her brother, of Wolff's justified contempt and the triumph of his friends. Bauer had also risen and now took a quick step to her side.

"*Gnädige Frau*, your brother has only done what hundreds of young fellows do. No doubt he hoped that he would have time enough allowed him to pay. Unfortunately, there are war-scares flying about, and the tradespeople are a little shy of English customers. I fear they will press payment. But there is no need for you to worry. Your husband need never even know that these debts existed. A word from you and they are paid and forgotten."

"What do you mean?"

"I will pay them."

"You?"

"Yes, I." He came still closer, so that she could hear his quick, irregular breathing. "You English are practical people," he went on, with an attempted laugh. "You know that there is precious little done out of pure charity in this world. If I help you out of this difficulty it is on certain conditions."

"I do not want to hear them——"

"Why not? They are simple enough. The one is that you should renew your friendship with my sister-in-law. It is awkward for her—this sudden cooling off; and she has a right to expect some consideration from you. The other concerns myself. I too must have your friendship—more than that—you, your regard." He took her hands and held them in a brutal, masterful grip. "You can't pretend you don't know—you must have known I cared—from the beginning—you——"

She wrenched herself free. She had seen his eyes and the hell in them, and, inexperienced though she was, she knew that it was not even a so-called love which he experienced, but a cruel thirst for conquest, the hunger for revenge, the desire to retaliate where he had been slighted and thwarted. She reached the door before he could restrain her, and with her hand on the bell stood there facing him. She seemed unnaturally calm, and her scorn for the man who had tried to trap her lent her a dignity, a look of triumph which curbed his passion and held him for the moment speechless.

"Please go," she said.

He bowed.

"By all means. But I shall not take this as your final answer."

"My husband will answer you—not I."

"Do you know what that will mean?"

"It will mean that I intend to have no secrets from him."

"You misunderstand me. Do you know the consequences? Your husband, as a man of honour, will challenge me. I shall have the choice of weapons, and I swear to you that I will kill him."

She said nothing. Her eyes had dilated, and every trace of colour had left her face; but she retained her attitude of proud defiance, and he went past her through the open door.

"You see, I can be patient," he said, looking back at her. "My sister-in-law is giving a ball on the 18th. If you are there I shall understand. If not——" He shrugged his shoulders. "No doubt your husband will see his way to settling Mr. Ingestre's troubles. As they stand, they are likely to cost him his collar. *Auf Wiedersehen, gnädige Frau*."

He was gone. She waited until the last echo of his steps had died on the wooden stairway, then she tottered forward and sank into Wolff's chair, her face buried in her hands. She did not cry, and no sound escaped her lips. She sat there motionless, bereft of thought, of hope, almost of

feeling. The end, the crisis to which she had been slowly drifting was at hand. It seemed to her that she heard the roar of the cataract which was to engulf her. And there was no help, no hope.

It was thus Miles Ingestre found her an hour later. Knowing that Arnim was out, he had donned a dressing-gown and now stood staring blankly at his sister, his hair disordered, his yellow face a shade yellower from the last day's dissipation.

"Why, Nora!" he said sleepily. "What's the matter, old girl?"

She looked up. His voice gave her back the power at least to act.

"Rittmeister Bauer has been here," she said. "He gave me this. Is it true?"

He took the paper which she held towards him and studied it, rocking on his heels the while in an uneasy silence.

"Yes, it seems true enough. What the devil did he give it you for?"

"He says the creditors are likely to press payment—and—and—Wolff will be held responsible. Oh, Miles, what have you done? What have you done?"

The last words broke from her like a cry of despair. They seemed to penetrate the thickness of Miles's phlegm, for he laid his hand on her shoulder, his lips twitching with a maudlin self-pity.

"It wasn't my fault, Nora. I didn't know what they were leading me into. If Wolff had only helped me a bit—if he hadn't been such a stuck-up prig, so beastly self-righteous. There, you needn't break out! I can't help it—it's the truth; it's not all my fault." He ran his shaky hand through his hair. "And, after all, there isn't so much to make a fuss about. Everybody in our set does that sort of thing, and I dare say Bauer will tide me over the worst. He's a decent fellow, and beastly rich. Look here, Nora"—his shifty eyes took an expression of stupid cunning—"if you asked him—you know he's a friend of yours—I'll be bound he'd help me."

Nora turned and looked at him. In that moment he seemed to her a complete stranger. Then she gently loosened herself from his hand. She did not answer. It was too useless. She rose and left him standing there, the silly smile still playing about his lips.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE FETISH

"Your mother is very ill," the Rev. John had written, "and I am in an indescribable state of anxiety both on her account and yours. Everybody here is quite certain that there is going to be war between us and Germany. Only yesterday the squire was down here talking to me about it. He says there is no hope, and that the conflict is bound to come. I do not understand politics myself, but it seems the Germans are determined to destroy us and get our power. It is very dreadful that a whole nation should show itself so avaricious, and I am sure God will help us punish so wicked and wanton an attack. All Delford is already on foot, and quite a number of young men are thinking of enlisting in the Territorials. The squire says it is a magnificent sight to see how the whole country rises at the call of danger. He himself has done not a little to help the general patriotic movement, and has opened a shooting-range in a field, where he is teaching his men to shoot. The sound of the guns makes me quite nervous, and is very bad for your poor mother, but the squire says it is helping to produce the best shots in Europe, so we must not complain, but bring our sacrifice to the motherland with a cheerful countenance. Nevertheless, I am terribly troubled. If war should break out—which God forbid!—what will become of you, my poor child, out there in the enemy's country? Could you not make your mother's health an excuse to come back to us, at any rate until the present crisis is over? Wolff will surely understand that you cannot stay in Germany if there is war. Find out from him what he thinks of the chances, and notice if there are any signs of preparation. If you can, come home. Your mother is very much against it, but she is ill and hardly understands the seriousness of the situation. We must all stand together in the moment of danger, and I am sure your heart is aching for the dear old country, and that you are longing to be with us. I have written to Miles that he is to return as soon as ever he thinks fit. He seems to be very tied by his studies, so that I do not like to press a hasty decision. You must talk it over together."

Nora had received this letter by the afternoon's post. She was reading it a second time when Wolff entered the room. He had on his parade uniform, and the cheery clatter of his sword and spurs jarred on her overstrung nerves.

"Why this magnificence?" she asked, trying to disguise her unreasonable irritability. "Is there anything unusual?"

"A review to which I am commanded," he answered quietly. "I may be home a little late for supper. I expect you will go and see Aunt Magda and Hildegarde. They will think it curious if you do not go soon."

"They have only just arrived," Nora said in the same tone of smothered irritation. "I could not have gone before."

Wolff bent over the back of her chair and kissed her.

"Please go!" he said coaxingly. "You used to be fond of them both, and they have been very good to us. Be nice to them—for my sake."

She was silent a moment, as though struck by a new thought. Then she nodded.

"I shall go this afternoon. Robert was coming, but it does not matter."

"Captain Arnold?" Wolff drew himself suddenly upright. "Were you expecting him?"

"Yes; he was coming to see me. Have you any objection?"

She had heard the colder, graver note in his voice, and it stung her. Was Arnold also to come between them—Arnold, in whose hands lay the one chance of rescue from the coming catastrophe? Was her last friend to be taken from her by a reasonless, unworthy distrust? She looked up into her husband's tanned face with a directness which was not unlike defiance.

"*I* have no objection," he answered her at last. "You know everything pleases me that makes you happy. I only beg of you to be careful."

"Careful!" she echoed.

"Captain Arnold has been in Berlin a month," he went on. "It is obvious that he has stayed for your sake, and for my part I am glad enough. But there are the evil tongues, little wife."

She sprang to her feet. If she could only have told him, only unburdened her heart of its crushing trouble, then perhaps he would understand, and the widening cleft between them be bridged. The words of a reckless confession trembled on her lips; but she remembered Bauer and his promise: "I swear I will kill him"; and the confession turned to bitterness, to an impotent revolt against the circumstances of her life.

"The evil tongues!" she echoed scornfully. "Why should I mind what they say now? They have taken everything from me—all my friends. I have only Robert left. Is it wrong to have friends in this country—friends who do not listen to the verdict of—of enemies?"

"It is not wrong, but it can be dangerous," he answered. "You have no enemies, Nora, only people who do not understand you and whom you have hurt. You have always been unfortunate in your friends. They have all stood between you and those to whom, by your position, you belong."

"You mean that if Arnold were German—'one of us,' as you would say—it would not matter?"

"Not so much."

She laughed angrily.

"How jealous you are!" she exclaimed. "How petty and jealous!"

"Nora!" He was white to the lips, and the hand which had fallen involuntarily on his sword-hilt showed every bone of the knuckles, so tense was the grip. Something in his expression frightened her.

"I do not mean you alone," she stammered, "but all of you. You are jealous of us and you hate us. When you marry one of us, you do your best to isolate her, to cut her off from her country and her people."

"Is that not inevitable—right, even? But have I done that?"

"No."

Her conscience smote her as she looked up at him standing erect and stern before her. She realised that another and graver issue had arisen between them—an issue that was perhaps the source of all. She realised that there had been something more than fear and a consequent irritability in her attitude towards him. She had not seen her husband in him, but only the representative of thousands who might soon be marching against her country, and for one short minute at least she had hated him. The realisation horrified her, drove her to a reckless attempt at atonement.

"Oh, forgive me, Wolff!" she cried eagerly. "I am simply unbearable this afternoon. Father has written a worrying letter—about mother—and that made me nervous and bad-tempered. Forgive me, dear. Don't be angry at the silly things I have said."

He yielded to the hands that drew him towards her, and kissed her, but rather gravely, as though he more than half-doubted her explanation.

"I am not angry, Nora. I only ask you to try and understand. God knows"—she thought his voice changed, and grew less certain—"I would never willingly come between you and any one

you cared for, but I have my honour to protect, and your honour is mine."

"Wolff, what do you mean? Have I done anything dishonourable?"

"No, dear. You cannot see things from my standpoint. You have been brought up with other ideas. I have tried to explain before. We have a double task. For our names' sake and for the sake of the uniform we wear we must keep ourselves from the very breath of evil. And that applies to every one connected with us."

Nora drew her hands away.

"I think I understand," she said. "For those two fetishes everything must be sacrificed. I will do my best to satisfy them and you."

"Thank you, Nora. I trust you implicitly."

She went to the door, hesitated, and then stole out. But in that moment's hesitation she had caught a glimpse of him standing at his table in an attitude of dejection, and had heard a smothered sigh of pain.

"I am miserable," she thought, "and I have made him miserable. How will it all end?"

In trembling haste she dressed and hurried out. She had a one all-dominating desire to seek help and comfort from some one who could understand her, some one, too, who held Wolff's happiness higher than her own and could be just to both. She needed a woman's comfort, and she turned now to Frau von Arnim. Hitherto she had shrunk from the inevitable meeting, now she sought it with the desperation of one who knows no other course. She had indeed no one else to turn to. Before Wolff she was tongue-tied. It was not only that silence was forced upon her by a mingled pride and fear; the subtle understanding between them had been rudely broken, and though their love for each other remained, they had inwardly become something worse than strangers. For there is no reserve so complete, so insurmountable, so surcharged with bitterness as that which follows on a great passion. And then, too, what had she to say to him? "I love you; but I have brought ruin upon your life. I love you; but I am not happy with you." Had she even the right to say that to him? Was it not, in any case, useless? Yet she knew she must unburden her heart, if for no other reason than that the power to keep silence was passing out of her hands.

Thus it was natural that her footsteps turned for the first time towards the little flat near the Brandenburger Tor. And on her road she met Arnold himself. It was as though fate pursued her.

"I was on my way to you," he said quietly, as he turned to walk by her side. "I have something to tell you, and should have been sorry if we had missed. It is about Miles."

Nora glanced at him, and her eyes were full of a miserable gratitude.

"How good you are to me!" she said. "I have not deserved it; you are my only friend here."

"Surely not," he answered. "What I can do is little enough. I have found out the full extent of Miles's liabilities and have endeavoured to persuade his creditors to wait. Unfortunately, they are obdurate on the subject. They believe there is going to be war and that your brother might leave Berlin suddenly. It seems to me that you should do one of two things, Nora—either allow me to—to advance the money, or to tell your husband the truth."

She put up her hand with a movement of involuntary protest.

"You know that the first is out of the question," she said proudly. "And the second! Oh, Robert, I am afraid! It may ruin Wolff, and then—they hate each other so. Wolff will send him away, and——"

She broke off with a quick breath that was like a sob.

"Isn't that the best thing that can happen?" Arnold answered. "Your brother will never do any good here. He is better in England."

"Yes, I know, I know. He has been weak and foolish. He is so—young." Her voice was full of a piteous apology. "And perhaps it was my fault—a little, at least. But I can't let him go, Robert. Whatever else he is, he is my brother, and I am so alone."

"Alone!" He looked at her aghast. "What do you mean?"

"Don't you understand? It's so easy—so simple. I am a stranger here. I am hated and distrusted. I suppose it was inevitable. In a few days you will have gone, and if Miles goes too I shall have no one left——"

"Nora!" he interrupted sternly. "There is your husband."

"Wolff—yes, there is Wolff. Robert, they say there will be war. Is it true?"

He frowned with perplexity. For the moment he could not follow her thought, and her question seemed to him erratic and purposeless.

"It is possible. For my part, I hope it may come to that. Things have been drifting to a crisis for a long time, and we must assert ourselves once and for all. These beggars are beginning to suspect us of fear or incompetence, and the sooner they are disillusioned the better." Suddenly

he caught a glimpse of her face, and stopped short. "Nora, what is the matter?"

"You forget," she said hoarsely. "I am not English any more."

They walked on in silence, Arnold too startled and overwhelmed by the conflict which she in one short sentence had revealed to him to speak or think.

"I was a thoughtless fool," he said at last. "For the moment I could not imagine you as anything but my own countrywoman. Now I see; and it is terrible for you—terrible. Even marriage cannot blot out one's nationality."

They had reached the door of the Arnims' flat, and she stopped and faced him with wide-open, desperate eyes.

"Nothing can!" she said. "And I know this—if there is war it will break my heart, or drive me mad. I don't know which."

Never before had she felt so drawn to him by all the ties of friendship and blood, and yet she went up the steps without a word of farewell. Arnold understood, and looked after her with a tender pity. He believed that he had crushed all passion out of his heart, but that a love remained which was infinitely greater, purified, as it seemed, from the dross of selfish desire. He felt as he stood there that he would willingly have given his life to save her from the threatening struggle, and yet—such is the irony of things—in that same moment he unconsciously brought her even deeper into the complicated tangle of her life. The door had opened, and a short, plump little woman stood on the threshold. She saw Nora, bowed, hesitated as though she would have spoken; then her eyes fell on Arnold, and she passed on down the steps with a cold, blank stare.

"Who was she, I wonder?" Arnold thought indifferently. "What was the matter?"

Poor Nora could have answered both questions, and a numbing sense of hopelessness crept over her as she toiled slowly up the stone stairs. She felt already, without knowing why, that she had come in vain. They were all her enemies, they all hated her. Why should Frau von Arnim be different from the rest? Had not Arnold said, "She is a cold, hard woman who will make trouble"? And yet, as she entered the narrow sitting-room of her aunt's new home, something of her first hope revived. Frau von Arnim was alone. She stood at the writing-table by the window, apparently looking out into the street, and Nora saw the resolute, aristocratic profile and graceful figure with a heart-throb of relief. This woman was like her mother in all that was noble and generous—perhaps she would be to her as a mother, perhaps she would really understand and help her in her great need.

"Aunt Magda!" she said. Her voice sounded breathless. A curious excitement possessed her, so that she could say no more. She felt that everything, her whole future life, depended on Frau von Arnim's first words.

The elder woman turned slowly. Had the faintest warmth of kindness brightened her face, Nora might have flung herself into her arms and poured out the whole story of her errors, her sorrows, her aching sense of divided duty; but Frau von Arnim's face was cold, impassive, and the hand she extended indifferent, her kiss icy. Nora drew back. In an instant everything in her had frozen. A dawning bitterness and resentment shut the gates of her heart against all confidence, all affection. She felt that here was an enemy from whom she need expect neither help nor mercy, and she seated herself with the hard, set face of a criminal who knows that he is before an unjust judge.

"I am glad that you have come at last, Nora," Frau von Arnim said calmly. "We had been hoping to see you some days ago. No doubt you have a great many friends who claim your attention."

Her quiet words were free from all sarcasm, and, indeed, every trace of feeling, but they stung Nora by their very indifference.

"I came as soon as I thought you would be glad to see me," she said. "I did not think you would want visitors whilst you were settling down."

Frau von Arnim studied the sullen girlish face opposite. She might well have retorted that a helping hand is always welcome, even in "settling down," and that Frau von Seleneck, despite her own household cares, had been daily to lend her advice and assistance. But it was not Magda von Arnim's custom to reproach for neglect, and, moreover, she had another and more important matter on her mind.

"Hildegarde is lying down at present," she said in answer to Nora's question, "and perhaps it is just as well. I have something I wish to speak to you about whilst we are alone."

Nora stiffened in her chair. She felt already trapped and browbeaten, and her eyes were bright with defiance as they met Frau von Arnim's steady gaze.

"I would have written to you," Frau von Arnim went on, in the same judicial tone, "but I knew

that my letters would find their way into Wolff's hands, and at that time I felt sure that you have some sufficient explanation to offer us for the unbelievable story which your friend, Captain Arnold, was clumsy enough to relate to us. I felt, as I say, sure that there was some painful mistake, and one which it would be unkind and useless to tell Wolff. Besides, for your sake I thought it better to wait. If there was some mistake, as I firmly believed, a letter could only have troubled and puzzled you. So I waited, meaning to ask you privately for an explanation. Since I have been in Berlin I have heard enough to see that my caution was altogether unnecessary."

"Aunt Magda!"

Frau von Arnim lifted a quiet hand, as though to command silence.

"It is obvious that Captain Arnold must have told you of our interview," she said, "and obvious that you have remained his friend. I hear that he is constantly at your house. I do not know what Wolff thinks and feels on the matter. He loves you, and is himself too honourable not to have a blind confidence in you. That, however, is not sufficient. *I* must know whether that confidence is justified."

Nora wondered afterwards that she did not get up then and go. Every inflection of the calm voice was a fresh insult, and yet she felt spell-bound, incapable of either attack or self-defence. In her mind she kept on repeating, "YOU are cruel, wicked, and unjust!" but the words were never spoken; they were stifled by the very violence of her indignation and growing hatred.

Frau von Arnim saw the hatred and interpreted it in the light of her own bitterness. For, little as Nora knew it, her "enemy" was suffering intensely. There were in Frau von Arnim's heart two things worth more to her than love or happiness: they were the fetishes against which Nora had railed in scorn and anger—"*Standesehre*" and pride of name. Since her arrival in Berlin a scandal had drifted to Frau von Arnim's ears which had been like a vital blow at the two great principles on which her life was built; and had Wolff been the cause instead of Nora she would not have been less severe, less indignant. As it was, she saw in his wife a careless, perhaps unworthy bearer of her name and her scorn and disappointment smothered what had been, and might still have been, a deep affection.

"I must ask you to answer one question," she continued. "Was it true what Captain Arnold told me? Were you his promised wife at the time when you married Wolff?"

Nora's lips parted as though in an impulsive answer, then closed again, and for a moment she sat silent, with her eyes fixed full on her interlocutor's face. The time had surely come to give her explanation, to appeal to the other's pity and sympathy for what had, after all, been no more than an act of youthful folly—even generous in its impulse. But she could say nothing. The stern, cold face froze her in a prison of ice, and she could do no more than answer in a reckless affirmative.

"Yes; it was perfectly true."

"Do you think your conduct was honourable, or fair to Wolff? Have you no explanation to offer?"

Nora rose to her feet. She was white with anger and indignation.

"None that I need offer you, Frau von Arnim," she said. Unconsciously she had reverted to the old formal title, and in her blind sense of injury and injustice she did not see the spasm of pain which passed over the elder woman's face.

Frau von Arnim also rose. She appeared calm almost to the point of indifference, but in reality her whole strength was concentrated on the suppression of her own emotion, and for once in a way the generous-minded, broad-hearted woman saw and understood nothing but herself.

"You force me to speak openly, Nora," she said. "I must point out to you that you have done something which in our eyes is nearly unpardonable. An engagement is almost as binding as a marriage and until it is dissolved no honourable woman or man has the right to enter into another alliance. But that is what you did; and whether you have an explanation to offer or not, makes, after all, no difference. What is done cannot be undone. But you are now no longer the Miss Ingestre who was free to act as she chose in such matters. You are my nephew's wife, and you bear our name and the responsibility which it implies. Whatsoever you do reflects itself for good or evil upon him and upon us all. Therefore we have the right to control your conduct and to make this demand—that you keep our name from scandal. That you have not done. From every quarter I hear the same warnings, the same insinuations. It is not only Captain Arnold who has caused them—I alone know the worst—it is your friendship with people outside our circle, your neglect of those to whom you are at least bound by duty, if not by affection. Before it goes too far to be mended, I ask—I demand that your intimacy with these people and with this Captain Arnold should cease."

"Captain Arnold is my friend," Nora exclaimed. "The only friend I have."

Had Frau von Arnim been less self-absorbed that one sentence might have opened her eyes and shown her a pitiful figure enough, overburdened with trouble and loneliness. But Nora's head was thrown back, and the defiant attitude blinded the other to the tears that were gathered in the stormy, miserable eyes.

"You appear only to consider yourself and your own pleasure," Frau von Arnim answered, "and that is not the point. The point is, what is good for Wolff and Wolff's reputation? It is not good for either that your name should be coupled with another man's, or that his brother-in-law should, in a few weeks, make himself renowned as a drunkard and a reprobate."

Nora took an impulsive step forward. She had come to make her confession, her explanation, to throw the burden of her brother's delinquencies upon these stronger shoulders. Now everything was forgotten save resentment, the passionate need to defend herself and her blood from insult.

"That is not true!" she stammered. "Nothing that you have said is true. I have not been dishonourable, and Miles——" She broke off because her conscience accused her, and a smile of bitterness passed over Frau von Arnim's pale features.

"Then all I can say is that English people must have an extraordinary sense of honour," she said.

Perhaps she regretted her own hasty words, but it was too late to recall them. A blank silence followed. Both felt that the straining bond between them had snapped and that they stood opposite each other like two people separated by an untraversable river.

Nora went to the door and from thence looked back at the proud figure of her adversary.

"You have no right to speak to me as you have done," she said in a voice that she strove in vain to steady. "What I do concerns no one but Wolff and myself, and I need not and shall not alter my life because of what you have said. You can do what you like—tell Wolff everything: I am not afraid. As to what you said about us—the English—it only proves what I already knew—you hate us because you envy us!"

And with this explosion of youthful jingoism she closed the door upon her last hope of help and comfort. But outside in the narrow, dusky hall she broke down. A strange faintness came over her, which numbed her limbs and senses and drew a veil before her eyes. A cry rose to her lips, and had that cry been uttered it might have changed the whole course of her life, sweeping down the barrier between her and the stern-faced woman by its very weakness, its very pitifulness. But she crushed it back and, calling upon the last reserves of her strength, went her way, too proud to plead for pity where she had already found judgment.

## CHAPTER XII
### WAR-CLOUDS

Nora had not seen Arnim the whole morning. He sat in his study with the door locked, and the orderly had injunctions to allow no one to disturb him. Nevertheless, towards midday a staff-officer was shown through the drawing-room into Wolff's sanctum, and for an hour the two men were together, nothing being heard of them save the regular rise and fall of their voices.

"What has the fellow come about?" Miles demanded in a tone of injury. "One would think they were concocting a regular Guy Fawkes plot, with their shut doors and their whisperings—or making plans for the Invasion."

Nora looked at her brother. He was lying full-length on the sofa, reading the latest paper from home; and as he had done very little else since he had lounged in to breakfast an hour late, complaining of a severe headache, Nora strongly suspected him of having varied the "Foreign Intelligence" with supplementary instalments of his night's repose.

"Is there any news?" she asked. She put the question with an effort, dreading the answer, and Miles grunted angrily.

"Things don't move much one way or the other," he said. "They stay as bad as they can be. The beggars won't go for us—they're funking it at the last moment, worse luck!"

"Why 'worse luck'?"

"Because it is time the cheek was thrashed out of them." He turned a little on one side, so as to be able to see his sister's face. "What are you going to do when the trouble begins?" he asked.

Nora's head sank over her work.

"I shall stay by my husband."

"Poor old girl!"

Nora made no answer. She was listening to the voices next door, and wondering what they were saying. Was Miles's suggestion possible? Was it true that her husband sat before his table hour after hour absorbed in plans for her country's ruin, his whole strength of mind and body set on the supreme task? And if so, what part did she play—she, his wife?

"And you, Miles?" she asked suddenly. "What will you do?"

He laughed uneasily.

"If my Jew friend gives me the chance, I shall make a bolt for it," he said. "It's a nuisance having all these confounded debts. I wish you weren't so stand-offish with the Bauers, Nora. If you had only sugared them a little——"

"Don't!" she interrupted almost sternly. "Your debts must be paid somehow, but not that way. Wolff must be told."

"Wolff!" He stared at her open-mouthed.

"There is nothing else to be done, unless father can help you."

"The pater won't move a finger," Miles assured her. "And if you tell your righteous husband, there will be the devil of a row."

He sat up rather abruptly as he spoke, for at that moment the study door opened, and Wolff and his visitor entered. Both men looked absorbed and tired, and Wolff's usually keen eyes had an absent expression in them, as though he were mentally engaged in some affair of importance and difficulty. His companion, however, a tall, ungainly major whom Nora had always liked because of his openly-expressed admiration for her husband's abilities, immediately assumed his manner of the gay and empty-headed cavalier.

"You must forgive my taking so much of your husband's time, *gnädige Frau*," he said as he kissed Nora's hand. "I had some rather stiff calculations, and I simply couldn't do them alone—you have no doubt heard what a dull person I am—so I came round to Arnim for help. There is nothing like having a clever junior, is there?"

He turned to Wolff with his easy, untroubled smile, but Wolff's face remained serious. He was buckling on his sword in preparation for departure, and appeared not to have heard his major's facetious self-depreciation.

"By the way, I have a small invitation for you, *gnädige Frau*," the elder officer went on. "A sort of peace-offering, as it were. My wife is driving out to see the Kaiser's review this afternoon, and asks if you would care to accompany her. If you have not seen it before it will be well worth your while to go."

"Thank you. I should be delighted!" Nora said eagerly. She knew Major von Hollander's wife as a harmless if rather colourless woman, who had as yet shown no signs of joining in the general boycott to which Nora was being subjected. Besides, every instinct in her clamoured for freedom from her thoughts and from the stuffy, oppressive atmosphere of this home, which seemed now less a home than a prison. She accepted the offer, therefore, with a real enthusiasm, which was heightened as she saw that her ready answer had pleased Wolff. He came back after the major had taken his leave, and kissed her.

"Thank you, Nora," he said. "It is good of you to go."

"Why good of me? I want to go."

"Then I am grateful to you for wanting."

Nora did not understand him, nor did she see that he was embarrassed by her question. She felt the tenderness in his voice and touch, and it awoke in her a sudden response.

"Don't overwork, dear," she said. "Couldn't you come with us?"

"I can't, little woman. When the Emperor calls——"

He finished his sentence with a mock-heroic gesture, and hurried towards the door. The major had coughed discreetly outside in the narrow hall, and in an instant duty had resumed its predominating influence in his life.

Nora took an involuntary step after him and laid her hand upon his arm. She wanted to hold him back and tell him—she hardly knew what; perhaps the one simple fact that she loved him in spite of everything, perhaps that she was sorry her love was so frail, so wavering; perhaps even, if they had been alone, she would have thrown down the whole burden of her heart and conscience with the appeal, "Forgive me! Help me!"

It was one of those fleeting moments when, in the very midst of discord, of embittered strife, a sudden tenderness, shortlived but full of possibilities, breaks through the walls of antagonism. Something in Wolff's voice or look had touched Nora. She remembered the first days of their marriage, and with hasty, groping fingers sought to link past with present.

"Wolff!" she said.

Very gently, but firmly, he loosened her clasp. He heard the major move impatiently; he knew nothing of the bridge which she had lowered for him to cross and take her in his old possession. And even if he had known he could not have acted otherwise.

"I must go, dear," he said. "I am on important duty."

"More important than I am?"

"Yes, even more important than you are!"

She drew back of her own accord and let him go. The moment's self-surrender was gone, and because it had been in vain the gulf between them had widened.

Miles laughed as he saw her face.

"It must be amusing to be married to a German," he said. "I suppose you are never an important duty, are you?"

Nora went out of the room without answering. She almost hated Miles for his biting, if disguised criticism; she hated herself because it awoke in her an echo, a bitter resentment against her husband. She was the secondary consideration: he proved it every day of his life. His so-called duty was no more in her eyes than an insatiable ambition which thrust every other consideration on one side. He had never yet given up a day's work to her pleasure; he sat hour after hour locked in his room, and toiled for his advancement, indifferent to her loneliness, to the bitter struggle which was being fought out in the secrecy of her heart; and when she came to him, as in that vital moment, with outstretched hands, pleading for his help and pity, he had thrust her aside because, forsooth, he had "important duty"! He was like those other men she had met who dressed their wives like beggars rather than go with a shabby uniform or deny themselves a good horse. He was selfish, self-important, and she was no more in his life than a toy—or at most an unpaid housekeeper, as her father had prophesied. How right they had been, those home-people! How true their warnings had proved themselves! Her love had intoxicated her, blinded her to the insurmountable barriers. She saw now, more clearly than ever before, in her dawning recognition, that she stood alone, without a friend, in the innermost depths of her nature a stranger even to her husband. And he had not helped her. He had left her to her solitude, he had cut her off from the one companion who might have made her life bearable. He was as narrow, as bigoted as the rest of those who judged her by the poor standard of their foreign prejudices and customs. The thought of that last interview with Frau von Arnim was fuel to the kindling fire in Nora's brain. She had been treated like a criminal—or, worse, like a silly child who has been caught stealing. She had been ordered to obedience like a will-less inferior who has been admitted into the circle of higher beings and must submit to the extreme rigour of their laws. Whereas, it was she who had condescended, who had sacrificed her more glorious birthright to associate with them! All that was obstinate and proud in Nora's nature rose and overwhelmed the dread of the threatening consequences. Let Frau von Arnim tell her husband the truth as she knew it! Let Wolff despise her, cast her and hers from him as, according to his rigid code of honour, he was bound to do! It would but hasten the catastrophe which in Nora's eyes was becoming inevitable. Her love for her husband sank submerged beneath the accumulation of a bitterness and an antagonism which was not so much personal as national.

Thus it was in no peaceful or conciliatory mood that she took her place in Frau von Hollander's carriage that afternoon. Her manners were off-hand, her remarks tinged with an intentional arrogance which led her meek companion to the conclusion that public opinion was right, after all, and *die kleine Engländerin* an intolerable person. Nevertheless, she did her best to act the part of amiable hostess, and attempted to draw Nora's attention to the points of interest as they passed.

"All the regiments in Berlin will be there," she said with a pardonable pride. "That is not a thing one can see every day, you know. It will be a grand sight. They are the finest regiments in the world."

"In Germany, perhaps," Nora observed.

Her companion made no answer, and Nora tried to believe that she was satisfied with her own sharpness. How these foreigners boasted! It was a good thing to point out to them that not every one was so impressed with their marvels.

Yet, as they reached the Tempelhofer Felde Nora had hard work to restrain her naturally lively interest and curiosity from breaking bounds. The regiments had already taken up their positions. Solid square after square, they spread out as far as the eye could reach, a motionless bulwark of strength, bayonets and swords glittering like a sea of silver in the bright December sunshine. Wolff had taught Nora to recognise them, and she took a curious pride in her

knowledge, though she said nothing, and her eyes expressed a cold, critical indifference.

"How fine the *Kürassiers* look!" Frau von Hollander said enthusiastically. "I have a cousin among them. They are all six-foot men—a regiment of giants."

"Rather like our Horse Guards," Nora returned; "but your horses are not so fine."

Frau von Hollander pursed her lips, and the bands striking up with the National Anthem put an end to the dangerous colloquy. The colour rushed to Nora's cheeks as she listened to the massed sound. She thought for an instant it was "God Save the King" that they were playing, and the tears of a deeply stirred patriotism rushed to her eyes. It was only a moment's illusion. Then the dazzling simultaneous flash of arms, a loud, abrupt cheer from the crowd about them reminded her of the truth. It was not the King who rode past amidst his resplendent Staff—it was the German Emperor—HER Emperor! She caught a glimpse of the resolute, bronze face, and because she was at the bottom neither narrow nor prejudiced, she paid her tribute of admiration ungrudgingly, for the moment forgetful of all the issues that were at stake. With eager eyes she followed the cortège as it passed rapidly before the motionless regiments. The resounding cheer which answered the Emperor's greeting thrilled her, and when he at last took his stand at the head of his Staff, and the regiments swung past, moving as one man amidst the crash of martial music, she stood up that she might lose no detail in the brilliant scene, her hands clenched, her pulses throbbing with a strange kind of enthusiasm. It was her first Kaiser parade; it overwhelmed her, not alone by its brilliancy but by the solidity, the strength and discipline it revealed; and had Frau von Hollander at that moment ventured a word of admiration she would have received no depreciatory comparison as answer. But poor Frau von Hollander had had enough for one day. She sat quiet and wordless, and silently lamented her own good-nature in taking such a disagreeable little foreigner with her in her expensive carriage.

The charge past had just begun when Nora heard her companion speak for the first time. It was not to her, however, but to a young dragoon officer who had taken up his stand at the carriage door, and Nora was much too absorbed to take any further notice of him. Their conversation, however, reached her ears, and she found herself listening mechanically even whilst her real attention was fixed on the great military pageant before her.

"The criticism should be good to-day," the officer was saying. "*Tadellos, nicht wahr*? Even the Emperor should be satisfied. I don't think we have much to fear from the future."

"From the future?" Frau von Hollander interrogated. She was not a clever woman, and her topics of the day—like her clothes—belonged usually to a remote period.

"I mean when the row comes," the dragoon explained. "We have all sealed orders, you know. No hurry, no bustle, no excitement; but when the Emperor presses the button—wiff!—then we shall be *en route* for England."

The brilliant picture before Nora's eyes faded. She was listening now with tight-set lips and beating heart.

"Ach, you mean the war!" her hostess said. "My husband is so reticent on the subject. I never hear anything at all. You think it will really come to that?"

"No doubt whatever—unless the English are ready to eat humble-pie. They are afraid of us because they see we are getting stronger, but they are equally afraid to strike. Their ancestors would have struck years ago, and now it is too late. Their navy is big on paper, but absolutely untried. As to their army——" He laughed good-naturedly. "That won't give us much trouble."

"You mean that it is not big enough?"

Frau von Hollander was pretending to forget Nora's existence, but there was a spite in her tone which was not altogether unpardonable. She was grateful for this opportunity to pay back the slights of the last hour.

"It is not merely too small," the officer returned judiciously; "it is no good against men like ours. Their so-called regulars are picked up out of the gutters, and the rest are untrained clerks and schoolboys who scarcely know how to shoot——"

Nora turned.

"That is a lie!" she said deliberately.

The conversation had been carried on loud enough to reach the adjoining carriages, and Nora's clear voice caused more than one occupant to turn in her direction. They saw a pretty young woman standing erect, white-lipped, with shining eyes, confronting a scarlet-faced officer, who for a moment appeared too taken aback to answer.

"I beg your pardon, *gnädige Frau*," he stammered at last, with his hand lifted mechanically to his helmet. "I—I did not quite understand——"

"I said that it was a lie," Nora repeated. "Everything you said was a lie. We are not afraid of

you, and our soldiers are the best and bravest soldiers in the world!"

The dragoon looked helplessly at Frau von Hollander, and the latter decided on a belated rescue.

"It is most unfortunate," she said with pious regret. "I really quite forgot for the moment. Frau von Arnim was English before her marriage——"

"——and is English still!" Nora interrupted proudly. "Please let me pass. I am going home."

"Then tell the coachman. I cannot let you walk."

Frau von Hollander was now thoroughly alarmed. She felt that the matter had gone too far, and was ready to atone in any possible way. But Nora thrust the detaining hand aside.

"I would rather walk," she said between her clenched teeth. She sprang from the carriage, ignoring the dragoon's offer of assistance. That unfortunate young officer followed her, his face crimson with very real distress.

"Please forgive me, *gnädige Frau*," he stammered. "How was I to know? Your name was German, and I had no idea—and a fellow talks such rot sometimes. Please forgive me!"

He was so young, so sincere and boyish in his regret that her heart under any other circumstances might have softened. But the insult had fallen on an open wound, and the pain was intolerable.

"You said what you thought, and you lied," she said. "That is all that matters."

He drew aside with a stiff salute.

"I have apologised. I can do no more," he said, and turned on his heel.

Thus poor Nora toiled her way over the hard, frozen roads alone, her thin-shod feet aching, her heart beating to suffocation with anger and misery. But she was unconscious of pain or weariness. Her English pride, the high love of her land had risen like a tide and swept her forward—to what end she neither knew nor cared.

## CHAPTER XIII
### ULTIMATUM

"I do not know if I have done right in telling you," Frau von Arnim said. "I had not meant to do so, but circumstances—and Nora—have forced me. Had she offered me any reasonable explanation, or promised to put an end to her intimacy with this Captain Arnold, I should not have thought it necessary to speak to you on the matter. She chose to ignore my appeal and my advice, and I felt that there was no other course left open to me but to warn you and to give you my reasons for doing so."

"I am sure you meant it all for the best," Wolff answered. "All the same—I would rather have waited until Nora had told me herself."

He was standing by the window, and did not see the sceptical lifting of his aunt's eyebrows. She frowned immediately afterwards, as though annoyed at her own display of feeling.

"It would have been better," she admitted calmly; "but Nora is in a state of mind which does not encourage hope. I cannot help saying so, Wolff; she has changed very much since the Karlsburg days."

"I know," he answered. "She has changed just in this last month or two. Poor little wife!"

"Other people have noticed it," his aunt went on. "The Selenecks, the Freibergs, all our best friends have the same complaint to make. She is off-hand, sometimes deliberately rude; and that sort of thing does not help to stop the scandal that is growing round her. Elsa Seleneck does not usually klatsch, but she is merciless where Nora is concerned, and it is all the more unpleasant because they were once good friends. I can only suppose that Nora has come under the influence of her brother and this man—this——"

"Nora's friendship with Captain Arnold is absolutely innocent," Wolff said firmly. "No doubt they have that sort of thing in England."

"Perhaps so, but we do not. People see this Englishman at your house day after day. There seems no reason for his constant visits. They call each other by their Christian names and go out together. Who can blame any one for putting the worst interpretation on Nora's conduct? And they are beginning to blame you, Wolff."

"Me?"

"They say that you ought not to tolerate her brother's presence in your house—that you ought to send this Arnold to the right-about."

He winced.

"I can't. She would never forgive me."

"Wolff! Has she grown more important than everything else in life?"

"No, no," he answered almost impatiently. "But she is young and careless—not bad. She has done nothing to deserve such treatment at my hands."

Frau von Arnim rose and came to his side.

"I know that she is not bad," she said. "At the bottom of her heart Nora may be honest, but she is headstrong and foolish, and folly can lead to the same catastrophes as deliberate wickedness. Unless you hold her back with a strong hand, Wolff, she will alienate you from all your friends, she will bring an unpleasant scandal upon our name and perhaps ruin your career. These last two things are more precious to me than anything on earth, and that is why I have spoken to you and put the matter in its most serious light. You must show her how wrong she is."

Wolff turned and looked his companion steadily in the eyes. He had just returned from a hard afternoon's work, and it was perhaps the recent fatigue which had drawn the colour from his face and left him with deep lines about the mouth and across the white forehead.

"Is she wrong?" he said. "Do you know, I am not sure, Aunt Magda. I am beginning to think the mistake is all mine. I loved her so, and she is so impetuous and warm-hearted. I carried her off her feet before she had time to think, to realise what she was giving up. And now—well, I suppose she is beginning to realise; the glamour has all gone, and her love"—he steadied his voice with an effort—"hasn't proved to be what she thought it was. It isn't strong enough to bring the sacrifices, and she is hungry for her own country and her own people. One can't blame her."

Frau von Arnim sighed.

"And when the war comes—what then?" she asked.

"God knows!"

He dropped wearily into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"We can but hope for the best," he said. "I must wait and be patient."

"You will say nothing to her, Wolff?"

"No. I do not understand what you have told me. I cannot believe that she should have deceived me and kept the secret so long, nor can I understand Captain Arnold's conduct. Nevertheless, I trust Nora, and one day perhaps she will tell me everything."

His aunt shook her head. That "one day" seemed too far off, too impossible, and in the meantime she saw the man with the bowed head, and understood something of what he was suffering.

"Do what you think best," she said, and, obeying a sudden impulse of tenderness, she laid her hand upon his shoulder. "Only let no harm come to the name, Wolff. It is all I ask, for your sake and for mine."

He took the hand and lifted it to his lips.

"You have the right to ask everything," he said. "Your sacrifice—yours and Hildegarde's—made it possible for me to make Nora my wife. I owe you——"

"Not your happiness, *armer Kerl*!" she interrupted sadly. "That was what we wanted to give you, but we have not succeeded. And you must not call it a sacrifice. We never do. You are just my only son, for whom it is a joy to smooth the way as much as it lies in our power."

She knelt down beside him. All her proud severity had melted. Had she shown a quarter of this tenderness to Nora, they would never have parted as they had done. But then Nora had sinned against her rigid code of honour; Nora deserved punishment—not tenderness.

"There is another thing I want to say, Wolff," she went on gently. "Seleneck confessed to me that you had sold Bruno. I cannot understand why you should have done so—unless you were short of money."

He turned away his head, avoiding her steady, questioning eyes.

"Won't you confide in me, Wolff—like you did in the old days?"

"Of course I will!" He tried to laugh. "Yes, it was money, Aunt Magda. You see, I knew we were going to be invited to the Hulsons' to-morrow; and Nora needed a new dress—and there were other expenses——

"Miles Ingestre, for instance?" she suggested bitterly.

"It was another mouth to feed," he admitted. "Nora's father doesn't understand that we are not rich. He hears that we invite and are invited, and so he thinks—naturally enough—that we can afford to keep Miles for a few months. And Nora does not quite understand either; so I sold Bruno to smooth things over."

He did not tell her what she none the less guessed—that many of Wolff's scanty gold pieces

had found their way into his guest's pockets by means of the simple formula, "I'll pay you back as soon as the pater's cheque arrives." Which event had, so far, never taken place.

Frau von Arnim rose and, going to her writing-table, drew out a thick envelope, which she put in his hands.

"It is our gift to you," she said. "I have been keeping it for—for any time when you might want a little extra, and I should like you to have it now. Perhaps you could get Bruno back."

"I can't!" he protested almost angrily. "Do you think I do not know what you have already given up for my sake—your friends, your home, your comfort?"

"And do you not know that all has no value for me compared to the one thing?" she answered, looking him steadily in the face. "I want you to remember that, should any greater trouble come, any sacrifice would be gladly borne rather than disgrace."

"Disgrace!" he echoed, with a stern contraction of the brows. "Of what are you afraid, Aunt Magda?"

"I do not know. I only wanted your promise that you would always come to me. As to this little gift"—her tone became lighter—"it would be an insult to our relationship to refuse it. I cannot allow my nephew to ride to war on an old charger. Surely you will allow me to throw this sop to the family pride?"

So she laughed away his objections, and he sat there with drawn, white face and looked about him, recognising the remnants of the old home, knowing for whose sake it was that they had come to rest in these narrow, gloomy confines. And, after all, it had been in vain. The sacrifices had brought no one happiness. He rose to go, and as he did so the door opened, and Hildegarde stood on the threshold. For a moment he hardly recognised her. She held herself upright as he had not seen her do for nearly three years; her cheeks were bright with colour and her eyes with the old light, so that it seemed as though the time of suffering had been blotted out of her life and she was once more his gay, untroubled playfellow.

"Why, Hildegarde!" he cried delightedly.

She came laughing towards him and gave him her hand with a cheery frankness. Neither by look nor tone did she betray that his presence had set her pulses galloping with the old pain and the old happiness.

"Why, Wolff!" she repeated, mocking him. "Do you think I am a ghost?"

"A phoenix, rather," he retorted gaily, for his joy was unfeigned. "I never dared to hope such good things of you. What has brought about the miracle?"

She told him about the "cure" she had been through, still in the same easy, unconcerned voice, and only her mother noticed the restless movement of the long, thin hands. Perhaps it was that one sign of emotion which prevented her from urging Wolff to remain. Perhaps she knew, too, that Wolff was stifling in the narrow room.

"You must come back soon, Wolff," Hildegarde said, as he bade her good-bye. "You have so much to tell us—about the war and our chances. But I will let you go to-day. You look so tired."

She did not ask that Nora should come too. She did not even mention Nora's name. Wolff remembered that significant omission as he trudged homewards, and he understood that Nora stood alone. She had lost touch with his friends and with those nearest to him, and he too had drifted out of her life. Such, then, was the end of a love and a union which was to have been endless! A few months of untroubled happiness, and the awakening! He felt no anger mingle itself with his grief, rather an intense pity. Though he could not understand her conduct in the past, he trusted her with the blindness of an unchanged devotion. He believed that she would have some explanation. He was sure that once at least her love had been sincere, that she deceived herself more than she had ever deceived him. She had believed her love for him stronger than that for home and people, than any other love. She had been mistaken—that was all. An old love had returned into her life and with it the old ties. The intoxication of the first passion was over, and she had gone back to those to whom she belonged, and a sea of racial prejudice, racial differences, and national feeling divided her from the man to whom she had sworn, "Thy God shall be my God, thy people my people." He had lost her. What then? What was to be the solution to the problem that lay before them both? He knew of none, and perhaps at the bottom of his heart there was still a glimmer of hope that he was mistaken and her friendship for Arnold no more than friendship, her change towards him no more than a passing shadow. He told himself that when worried and overworked as he was, a man can too easily exaggerate the extent of a misfortune. Who knew what change for the better the next few hours might bring?

Thus he reached his home with a lighter heart than he had expected. Nora was not yet back from the parade. It surprised him, therefore, to hear loud and apparently angry voices

proceeding from his room. He entered quickly, without waiting to lay sword or helmet aside, and found Miles and another older man, whose appearance warranted the supposition that his descent from the Mosaic family was unbroken.

Wolff looked from one to the other, and perhaps his knowledge of both classes of men warned him of what was to come.

"Might I ask for an explanation?" he said quietly.

Miles was clinging to the back of a chair and trembling from head to foot, either with fear or rage or a mixture of both. His usually sallow face was now grey and his lips twitched convulsively before he managed to answer.

"I'm beastly sorry, Wolff," he stammered. "It's the devil of a nuisance, and I swear I never meant to bring you into the mess. This—this man has come fussing about some money. I told him to wait, but he seems to have got some idiotic ideas in his head——"

"The Herr Baron vill not blame me that I am anxious for my moneys," the Jew interrupted, speaking also in broken English and giving Wolff the benefit of a servile bow. "Dis genelman have borrowed much from me, and I am a poor man. I vould not have took the risk but dat he gave me your name as guarantee. He said dat you vere his broder-in-law and dat it vere all safe. Dat is von month ago, and since den I have heard no more of my genelman, but many English leave Berlin just now, and I come to see if vat he say be true."

"It is perfectly true. Mr. Ingestre is my brother-in-law."

"Den I am satisfied. De Herr Baron vill see to it as officer and genelman."

He took a step towards the door, but Wolff stopped him with a curt gesture. Nor for a moment had he taken his eyes from Miles's colourless and sickly countenance.

"You say that Mr. Ingestre owes you money," he said. "Will you be so kind as to show me the bill?"

The Jew immediately produced a slip of greasy paper and handed it to him. Wolff took it with the tip of his fingers, his eyes narrowing with an irrepressible disgust. There was a moment's waiting silence. Miles's eyes were riveted on the carpet, the Jew was taking an inventory of the furniture, and neither saw Wolff's face. For that matter, save that the lips beneath the short fair moustache had stiffened, there was no noticeable change in his expression.

"Twelve hundred marks!" he said at last, throwing the paper on his table. "Have you that sum by you, Miles? It would be better to pay this gentleman at once."

Miles Ingestre started and glanced loweringly at his brother-in-law's face. He suspected sarcasm, but Wolff's pitiless steel-grey eyes warned him that the time for retort had not yet come.

"Eh—no; I'm afraid I haven't," he stammered. "I am expecting a cheque from home, and of course will pay up at once. To tell you the truth——"

His thin, hesitating voice died away into silence. Perhaps he felt that Wolff had no desire to hear "the truth." He held his tongue, therefore, and let events drift as they might. Wolff had taken Frau von Arnim's envelope from his pocket. He opened it and counted twelve notes for a hundred marks each on to the table.

"Kindly give me your receipt," he said.

The Jew obeyed willingly, scratching an untidy signature across the bottom of the piece of paper which Wolff pushed towards him. With greedy, careful fingers he counted the notes and stuffed them in his pocket.

"It is a great pleasure to deal vid so great genelman," he said as he shuffled to the door.

Wolff waited until he was gone, then he threw open the window as though the atmosphere sickened him. When he turned again his expression was still calm, only the narrowed eyes revealed something of what was passing through his mind.

Miles did not look at him. He was playing with the paper-weight on the table, struggling to regain his dignity. It bit into his mean soul that he should be indebted to "this foreigner."

"It's awfully decent of you, Wolff," he broke out at last. "I'm really awfully grateful, and of course as soon as my money comes——"

Wolff cut him short with an abrupt and contemptuous gesture.

"I ask for no promises," he said, "and make no claim on your gratitude. What I have done was not done for your sake, but for Nora's and my own. I do not wish the scandal of a disgraceful debt to be associated with my name. No doubt you do not understand my point of view, and there is no reason why I should explain it. There is one matter, however, on which I have the right to demand an explanation. You have run through something like £100 in the time that you have been here. Where has this money gone?"

Miles shrugged his shoulders. The movement suggested that as between one man of the

world and another the question was superfluous.

"Oh, you know—the usual thing," he said. "Suppers, horses, and women. The people I know all did it. It was pretty well impossible to keep out of the swim."

Wolff detached his sword and seated himself at the table; Miles remained standing, and Wolff did not suggest that he should change his position.

"That means probably that you have other debts," he said. "Is that so?"

"£100 goes nowhere," Miles answered sullenly. "I didn't know they would come down on me so soon."

"You have a curious way of answering a question. Still, I fancy I understand you. You will make a list of these other debts and lay them before me. After that, you will return to England." He saw Miles's start of anger, and went on deliberately: "You have associated with the scum of Berlin, and therein I am perhaps to blame. I should have put an end to it before you drifted thus far. But I was under the illusion that at your age and as Nora's brother you would be capable of behaving as a man of honour. Otherwise, I should never have allowed you in my house."

He opened a drawer and began sorting out some papers before him, with the same deliberation, indifferent to the look of intense hatred which passed over his companion's face. "You have proved that you cannot rise to so necessary a standard," he went on, "and therefore a prolongation of your stay under my roof has become impossible. Nora must know nothing of this, and there must be no fuss or scandal. You will write this evening to your father and request him to telegraph for you immediately—the possibility of war will be sufficient excuse. Until your departure you will behave as usual, with the exception that you do not leave the house. You will, of course, send your apologies to General von Hulson for to-morrow evening. I do not wish you to accompany us. That is all I have to say. You will do well to make no difficulties."

Miles laughed angrily.

"Do you think I'd make difficulties if I could help it?" he demanded. "I'd give ten years of my life to get back to England."

"There is no object in your making fate such a generous offer," was the ironical reply. "Your debts here will be paid—somehow or other. The road home is open to you."

"I can't go without money."

"Your passage will be paid for you."

"I don't mean that—I mean—there are reasons which make it impossible for me to return—just now——"

Arnim swung round in his chair.

"You mean that you have debts in England?"

"Yes."

"In other words, that you left England on that account?"

Miles shrugged his shoulders.

"There were a good many reasons," he said.

There was a moment's silence. Arnim began to write with a studied calm.

"Your debts here will be paid on condition that you leave within forty-eight hours," he said. "I cannot do more for you. I only do that for Nora and for the sake of my own name."

Males leant forward over the table. He was not usually clever, but hatred had made him clever enough to take the most cruel weapon that lay within his reach.

"You talk as though I were such a beastly cad," he said, "but you shut your eyes to the other things that go on in the house. You are particular enough about your precious honour and name where I am concerned; but you let Arnold come into the house and make love to your wife without turning a hair."

"Miles, take care what you are saying!"

"I don't mind telling the truth. I have seen them——"

Wolff held up his hand, and there was something in the movement which checked the flood of malice and treachery and sent Miles back a step as though he had been struck.

"You can go," Wolff said quietly.

Again Miles wavered, torn between rage and cowardice. He hated this iron-willed martinet with his strait-laced principles and intolerable arrogance, but his fear was equal to his hatred, and after a moment he turned and slunk from the room.

Arnim went on writing mechanically. His brain—the steeled, highly trained brain—followed the intricate calculations before him with unchanged precision, but the man himself fought with the poison in his blood, and in the end conquered. As a strong swimmer he rose triumphant above the waves of doubt, suspicion, and calumny which had threatened him and held high above

reach the shield of his wife's honour. It was all that was left him—his trust in her, his belief in her integrity. He knew that a crisis was at hand. With Miles's departure would come the moment in which Nora would have to make her choice between the home and people which he represented and her husband. How would she choose? The hope that had comforted him before seemed all too desperate. Family and country called her, and her love was the last frail bond which held her to him. Would it hold good? Had it not perhaps already yielded? Was she not already lost to him?

Yet, as he heard the door of the neighbouring room open and the sound of her quick footsteps, the hot blood rushed to his face, his pulses beat faster with the hope kindled to something that was almost a joyous certainty. She was coming to him. He would see her standing irresolute before him, and he would take her in his arms and by the strength of an unconquerable love draw her back over the tide which was flowing faster and broader between them. It was impossible that he should lose her, impossible that the outward circumstances of their lives should be stronger than themselves and what had been best in them—their love. Even when the footsteps stopped and he remained alone, the impossibility, absurdity of it all was still predominant over despair. He rose and pulled open the door. He had no clear conception of any plan. He was so sure that the moment they stood face to face she would understand everything by some miracle of sympathy, the very thought of an "explanation" was a sacrilege against the power with which he felt himself possessed.

"Nora!" he cried joyfully. "Nora!"

She stood immediately opposite him. Her hat had been flung recklessly on the table, and her hair was disordered, her face white and drawn. She made no answer to his greeting. Her eyes met his with no light in their depths. They were sombre, black, and sullen.

"Nora!" he repeated, and already the note of triumph had died out of his voice. "What is the matter?"

She came at once to him, taking his hands, not in affection but in a sort of feverish despair.

"Wolff," she said, "I want to go away from here—I want to go home!"

The moment of hope and enthusiasm was over. Something mysteriously cold and paralysing had passed like an icy breath over his self-confidence and changed it to a frigid despair. He could not even plead with her, nor tell her of the love which he felt for her nor of the pain which he suffered. Everything lay at the bottom of his heart a dead, frozen weight. He loosened her hands from his arm and forced her gently into a chair.

"You want to go away?" he said quietly. "Why?"

"Because I hate this place and—and every one."

"Does that include your home and your husband, Nora?"

She laughed wildly.

"My home! This isn't my home: it never has been. I have always been a stranger—an exile here. Everything is foreign to me—everything hateful. If you were twenty times my husband, I should say it. I loathe and detest this country and I loathe and detest your people. I am English. I was mad, mad, mad to believe I could ever be anything else!"

She was hysterical with fatigue and excitement, and scarcely conscious of what she was saying. But Wolff, who knew nothing of what had happened at the parade, heard in her words a deliberate and final declaration.

"If you hate my country and my people, you must hate me," he said. "Has it come to that already?"

She sprang to her feet as though goaded by some frightful inner torment.

"No, no, I don't hate you," she cried. "I love you at the bottom—at least, I believe I do. I can't tell. Everything in me is in revolt and uproar. I can't see you clearly as you are, as I love you. You are just one of those others, one of those whom I detest as my deadliest enemy. That is why I must go away. If I stayed, God knows, I believe I should grow to hate you."

Every trace of colour faded out of his face, but he did not speak, and she ran to him and clasped his arm with the old reckless pleading.

"Let me go!" she begged. "Let me go home! Things will be better then. I shall quiet down. I shan't be so constantly maddened and irritated as I am now. I shall have time to think. Wolff, I *must* go!"

"If you go now, it will be for ever," he said steadily. "The woman who leaves her husband and her country in the time of danger sacrifices the right to return."

"Wolff!" Her hands sank to her side. She stared at him blankly, horror-stricken.

"You must see that for yourself," he went on in the same tone of rigid self-control. "If war breaks out and you return to England, you can never come back here as my wife. I am a German

and an officer, and the woman who shares my life must share my duty. That is the law. It is a just and right one. Husband and wife cannot be of different factions. They must stand together under the same flag. In marrying me you accepted my country as your own. If you leave me now, you are turning traitor, and there must be no traitors amongst us."

He put the case before her with pitiless logic, more overwhelming than the fiercest outburst of passion. The hysterical excitement died out of her face.

"A traitor!" she repeated dully. "How can I be that? How can any one give up their country?"

"I do not know," he answered, "and therefore whatever you choose I shall not blame you. I only show you the inevitable consequences."

"Wolff, I can't stay here. Everybody hates me. I can't hide what I feel. You don't know the things I have done—and said. I—I insulted some one this afternoon."

"It can all be lived down," he returned. "People will forgive and understand, if you stand by us."

"But I can't—not in my heart of hearts. Wolff, if war breaks out, I shall be praying for your ruin—yes, in your very churches I shall pray for it. Perhaps my prayers will direct the very bullet that kills you——"

Her voice shook with a kind of smothered horror, which stirred the cold weight in his heart to pity.

"Hush, Nora, hush! That is all exaggerated feeling. It is hard for you, but you must choose. Either you must sacrifice your country or your husband. That is the simple issue."

"Why should *I* bring the sacrifice?" she retorted. "Why must *I* be the one to give up everything that I was taught to love and honour next to God? If you love me, leave the army, leave Germany! Let us go away—anywhere—and be happy together!"

"Nora!"

"You see!" she exclaimed with bitter triumph. "That is too much to ask from you!"

"I am a soldier," he said.

"Then I would to God I had been born to so easy a profession!"

She turned away, battling with the fierce, angry sobs that choked her. The next instant his arms were about her. There was no hope and no joy in his embrace. He held her as he might have done in the midst of shipwreck and before the approach of death.

"Do you think it is easy to put before you the choice—knowing what you will choose?" he asked.

"Knowing——?" she stammered.

"You do not love me enough to stand by me."

"That is not true!"

She freed herself and took a step back, searching his face as though to find there an answer to some agonising doubt.

"That is not true," she repeated breathlessly.

He lifted his hand in stern warning.

"Think, Nora! We stand, you and I, at the parting of the ways. Make your choice honestly—I shall not blame you. But once you have chosen, there must be no turning back. If you choose to follow me, it must be to the bitter end of your duty. You must curse my enemies and bless my friends. Otherwise there can be no peace and happiness between us. If you choose your country—and those others whom you love—you shall go to them. I shall keep you in my heart until I die, but I will never see you again."

In spite of his strongest effort, his voice shook, and that one signal from the depths of his despair called forth the one and only answer of which her headlong, passionate nature was capable. She flung herself into his arms, clinging to him in a storm of grief and pity.

"With God's help, I will stand by you to the end, my husband!"

For a long minute he held her to him, and then gradually he felt how her whole frame relaxed and her arms sank powerless to her side. He looked down into her face. It was very pale, and a faint, childlike smile of utter weariness hovered round the half-open lips.

"I am so tired, Wolff," she said under her breath, "so tired!"

Without answering, he bore her to the sofa and laid her with a clumsy tenderness among the cushions. But he did not speak again. For the moment the conflict was over; a truce had been called between them. Only his instinct knew it was no more than that. Thus he knelt down silently beside her, and with her hand still clasped in his watched over her as she slept.

## CHAPTER XIV
### THE CODE OF HONOUR

Nora stood before the long glass in the drawing-room and studied herself with a listless interest. The expensive white chiffon dress which Wolff had given her for the occasion became her well, and at another time she might have found an innocent pleasure in this contemplation of her own picture. But she was exhausted, spiritually and physically. The storm of the day before had shattered something in her—perhaps her youth—and she saw in the mirror only the pale face and heavy eyes, and before her in the near future an evening of outward gaiety and inward trial. That which she had once sought after with feverish desire—magnificence and contact with the great world where stuffy flats and poverty were unknown—had become her poison. She shrank instinctively, like some poor invalid, from all noise and movement. She would have been thankful to be able to lie down and sleep and forget, but Duty, that grim fetish to which she had sworn obedience, demanded of her that she should laugh and seem merry beneath the critical, questioning eyes of those who to-morrow might be fighting against her people.

Miles was lying in his usual attitude on the sofa, watching her. He had been curiously quiet the whole day, keeping to the house and avoiding Arnim with an increased shyness. Nora believed that she understood him. She did not see that his young face was sallow and lined with dissipation, nor that his furtive eyes were heavy and bloodshot. She saw in him only the brother, the Englishman, and that one fact of his nationality covered him with a cloak, hiding from her all that was pitiable and contemptible, lending him a dignity, a worthiness that was not his. So also she interpreted his general conduct and his abrupt refusal to accompany her to the Hulsons' ball. She felt that he was awaiting the hour of departure to his own country, chafing at the bonds which held him, and that, like a true Englishman, he shrank from all further association with his future enemies. She honoured him for it—she envied him for it; but she dreaded her own loneliness. She came to his side and laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

"I wish you were coming too," she said, "for my sake, not for yours."

"I can't," he retorted sullenly.

"No, I know. I was not going to try and persuade you. I understand so well how you feel. Oh, Miles, you must go back to England—we must manage it somehow. I shall tell Wolff to-night. Things can't be worse than they are—and perhaps he will help."

Miles Ingestre looked at her keenly. An expression that was half cunning, half amused lifted the moody shadows from his face. It was obvious that she did not know what had passed between Wolff and himself, and it was not his intention to tell her. His promise to Wolff on the subject did not weigh with him—he had other and better reasons for keeping silence. In the first place, he had no wish to awaken any sense of gratitude towards her husband in Nora's heart; in the second, he still needed money.

"You need not worry him with my debts," he said carelessly. "They can wait, and anyhow they wouldn't keep me in Berlin. The difficulty is on the other side."

"In England?"

"Yes; I must have ready money somehow. I can't go back until the way has been cleared a little." He pulled himself up on to his elbow. "Look here, Nora, you could help me if you wanted. Wolff can't and won't do anything, but there's Bauer. You don't need to look so shocked—he's told me himself that he would do me a good turn, only his sister-in-law has the purse-strings, and you have rather offended her. If you went to her ball on the 18th——"

"Miles, it is impossible! You don't know——"

"I only know that if you don't help me I shall be in a bad fix. When the war breaks out——"

"Is war certain?"

"Unless they funk it. I believe the ambassador has his trunks packed and his carriage waiting."

Nora made a gesture of mingled impatience and despair.

"Why must there be war?" she cried. "Why can't we leave each other alone? What is there to quarrel about?"

"Nothing!" Miles retorted. "The whole thing is got up. The beggars want more than is good for them, and we've got to keep them in their places. That's the gist of the matter. It has to come sooner or later."

Nora was silent. His words, with their unvaried mingling of scorn and pride, aroused in her an equally mingled feeling of irritation and sympathy. Why was he so sure of victory, why so

scornful of "these foreigners"? What right had he to be either contemptuous or arrogant? What right had she to share those feelings with him, even if only in the secret places of her heart?

"By the way," Miles went on, watching her intently. "What's the matter with you and poor old Arnold? He has been here twice to-day, and you have been so-called 'out' each time. I got a note from him asking what was up. It's pretty rough luck on him, as he wants to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?" Nora repeated. She had started perceptibly, and Miles grinned.

"He has marching orders, and is leaving to-morrow night. I bet he would have gone days ago if it hadn't been—well, for some one!"

"Miles, I will not have you talk like that!"

She had turned on him scarlet with anger and humiliation, but Miles only burst out laughing.

"You need not get into such a rage, sweet sister mine! I didn't say it was you, though if the cap fits——" He broke off into a sulky silence. Wolff had entered. He was in full dress, and bespattered with mud, as though he had returned from an arduous ride. In one hand he carried a dispatch case. One glance at his face showed them that he controlled a strong excitement.

"I am awfully sorry, Nora," he said hurriedly, "it is impossible for me to accompany you. I have been driven from pillar to post the whole day, and now I have some work which will take me the whole night. You must give my excuses to General von Hulson. He will understand why it is. A good many officers will be absent for the same reason."

"Then I must go alone?" she asked.

Absorbed as he was, he heard the reproach and annoyance.

"Do you mind that?"

"I shall hate it!" she said emphatically.

The word "hate," with all its too recent associations, caused him to look at her closely. He saw that she had lost her pallor, and that the old defiant light burnt in her eyes.

"Perhaps it would be better, then, if Miles accompanied you," he said. "There is still time."

"I do not wish Miles to do anything he objects to," she returned coldly. "No doubt he has his reasons for not going."

Wolff's eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch.

"No doubt," he said, glancing in Miles's direction; "but perhaps if I added my appeal to yours he would consent to overcome—his reasons."

Miles rose sullenly to his feet.

"If you want it—of course," he mumbled.

Wolff nodded absently. He went into his room, closed the door, leaving Nora alone. There had been an expression of anxiety on his face which did not, however, excuse his apparent indifference in Nora's eyes, and she stood frowning after him, puzzled and deeply wounded. But she made no attempt to follow him. The scene of the previous evening had been a last effort; she was too weary, too hopeless to strive again after a reunion which seemed already an impossibility.

Twenty minutes later Miles reappeared in the full glory of his evening clothes. Nora was surprised—perhaps a little disappointed—to observe that his spirits had risen.

"The carriage is waiting," he said. "Hurry up, or we shall be late."

Nora hesitated. A superstitious clinging to an old custom led her to the threshold of Wolff's room. She tried the handle of the door without effect, and when she turned away again her cheeks were scarlet.

"Locked, eh?" Miles said. "I bet he's afraid of us catching sight of his papers. Arnold said some of those staff fellows have the handling of pretty valuable stuff."

Nora gave no attention to his words, though she was destined to remember them. She led the way down the narrow stairs into the street where the cab was waiting for them, and a minute later they were rattling out of the little by-street into the busy thoroughfare.

It seemed to Nora that the crowds were denser than usual, that a curious unrest was written on the usually placid, cheerful faces that flashed past the open carriage window. She remembered Wolff's expression as he had entered the room; she felt now that it had been the unconscious reflection from those other faces, and that the one invisible bond of sympathy which unites all men of the same race had passed on the flame of patriotism from one to another, till in all these thousands there burned, above every meaner passion, the supreme *Vaterlandsliebe*. Only *she* felt nothing, nothing—though she was bound to them by oath—save fear and horror. She felt alone, deserted. Miles was the one being in the whole seething crowd who felt as she felt, who suffered as she suffered. She turned to him with an impulsive tenderness. He was not looking out of the window, but staring straight before him, with his low forehead puckered into

thoughtful lines.

"It's a queer thing," he said, as though he felt her questioning glance. "Here we both are in a foreign country, mixing with people whom we shall be blowing up to-morrow, and to-day not moving a finger to harm them, just because the word has not been given, as it were. If I threw a bomb amongst all those big-wigs to-night, who knows what victories I might prevent?—and yet I suppose it would be murder. And then, there is Wolff stewing over papers that, I bet, the English War Office would give a few thousands just to look at; you and I sit and watch him and never move a hand."

"What do you expect us to do?" she returned listlessly.

"Nothing, I suppose."

The rest of the drive passed in silence, and once in the ball-room, Nora lost sight of her brother completely. He drifted off by himself, whither and with whom she could not think, for she knew that he had no friends in the brilliant crowd. She, too, was friendless, though there were many there who bowed to her and passed on, and for the first time she realised the full extent of her isolation. The Selenecks were not there, and she was glad of their absence: she would have hated them to have been witnesses of her loneliness. Those whom she knew, whose comradeship with her husband should have guaranteed a certain courtesy, passed her by. Nora cared nothing for them, but the humiliation stung her to the quick. She was English, and because she was English they insulted her, tacitly and deliberately. Not all the months in her husband's country had taught her to understand that she had insulted them, that she had trampled on their pride of race, and scorned the customs and opinions which were their holiest possessions. It never occurred to her that the description of the scene of the previous afternoon had passed from lip to lip with the rapidity of lightning, and that in the eyes of that mighty brotherhood of soldiers, and of that still mightier sisterhood of their wives, she was branded as a renegade, as a woman who had spat upon her husband's uniform, and exalted another race above that to which she belonged —a *Deutschfeindliche*, an enemy who masqueraded among them under a transparent guise of hypocritical friendship. Perhaps some pitied her; but for the most part they were the older men, whose experience taught them to be pitiful—and they were not present on this particular night. Even if they had been they could have done nothing to help her. She was an outcast, and for them she had made herself "unclean." Thus poor Nora, still young and headstrong in all her emotions, her sensibilities raw with the events of the last weeks, stood alone and watched the scene before her with eyes from which the tears were held back by the strength of pride alone.

There must have been considerably over two hundred guests present, almost exclusively officers of lower rank, with here and there a civilian to throw the brilliant uniforms into more striking relief. Nora could not but be impressed by the tall, finely built men, with the strong-cut, bronzed faces, and in each she saw a dim reflection of her husband. There was perhaps no real resemblance, but they were of one type—they were German, and that one similarity aroused in her the old feeling of wild opposition against the man she loved, and whom she had sworn to stand by to the end. Her love for him was as genuine as her admiration for these, his brothers—as genuine as her hatred for him and for them all.

In the midst of her bitter reflections she heard a voice speak to her, and, turning, found Bauer at her side. She had expected him the whole evening, and her humiliation deepened as she saw the cynical satisfaction in his eyes. She knew that he was triumphing in the belief that he had won, that in her loneliness she would turn to him, and the knowledge changed her misery to a desperate pride.

"Well, *gnädige Frau*," he said. She made no answer, and his smile broadened. "You see, I am very punctual," he went on. "I have come for my answer. What is it to be?"

"I gave it you once," she returned. "Is that not enough?"

"Circumstances can alter the most determined. Are you not tired of this Pharisaical crowd, who pretend to look upon you as dirt because you do not pronounce their shibboleth as it pleases them? Are you not ready now to come amongst friends who wish you well—who would help you? You have only to say the word."

She looked about her, feeling her isolation like an icy wind, and for an instant knew temptation. How easy it would be to yield! What, after all, had he asked of her?—her friendship, common politeness for the woman who had shown her kindness. What had he offered her? His help and support in her loneliness and need. Then she remembered—and the temptation passed.

"My answer remains the same, Herr Rittmeister."

His face became suffused with a dull red.

"*Gnädige Frau*, take care! It is not only your brother who will suffer for your decision!"

She heard the angry threat in his voice, and a feeling of contempt and aversion, almost physical in its intensity, came over her. She looked about her, half unconsciously seeking some way of escape. Miles was nowhere to be seen. Her eyes flashed rapidly over the crowd, picking out the black evening coats, and then for the first time she saw Arnold. She went to meet him, regardless of prudence, of the rage in Bauer's eyes, of the malice and suspicion that watched her from every side. She only knew that a friend had come to her in the midst of enemies, and that she was no longer alone.

"Oh, Robert!" she cried. "How glad I am to see you! How did you manage to come here?"

"The Ambassador got me the invitation," he said, taking her hand in his strong clasp. "God knows it isn't the time to seek such hospitality, but I had to see you somehow, Nora, before I went."

"Let us get away from this crowd," she said hurriedly. "We can't talk here."

He gave her his arm and led her to one of the supper-tables that were placed beneath the gallery.

"We can pretend to want coffee, or something of the sort," he said. "No one will disturb us."

She looked across and smiled at him with a fleeting radiance. Oh, that English voice, that English face! Laughter of relief and thankfulness fought with the tears that had so long lain checked, and now struggled for release beneath the touch of a friend's unspoken sympathy.

"Nora, what is wrong?" he went on. "Why wouldn't you see me? Have I offended you in any way?"

"Offended me!" She laughed brokenly. "Do I look offended, Robert? Don't you know I could have danced for joy when I saw you coming?"

Reckless Nora! Her words, spoken in a moment of relief from an agonising pressure, had not the meaning which he believed he read out of them. Something was not any longer so selfless, so resigned, flashed into his steady grey eyes.

"Then what is it, Nora? Tell me everything. You know you have promised me your friendship."

She did not hesitate an instant. Those three hours beneath the enemy's fire had driven her to exasperation, to that point of hysterical nervousness from which most feminine folly is committed.

"They forbade my seeing you," she said—"not in words; but they said things which left me no choice. They said I was bringing disgrace upon my husband, and upon his name——"

"Nora! Who said that?"

"Frau von Arnim. She hates me. And Wolff said much the same. They can't understand a straight, honest friendship between a man and a woman."

"You mean it was because of me?"

"Yes. Of course Frau von Arnim knows everything about—about the past, and she believes—oh, it is too horrid what she believes. We don't need to think about it. She has not told Wolff. If she had he would have turned me out of the house or locked me up in the cellar. None of them—not even he—can understand. Oh, Robert, you don't know how hard it was to have to send you away! You and Miles are the only people in all this big city to whom I can turn."

Arnold sat silent, staring in front of him. His pulses were beating with a growing, suffocating excitement. He knew by every tone of her voice, by every glance of her stormy, miserable eyes, that she was in his power, that he had but to make the appeal and she would follow him out of the room whithersoever he led her. The knowledge touched his steady-flowing blood with fever—in the same moment he was conscious of remorse and shame. He had lingered at her side against every behest of wisdom and honour, deceiving himself and her with an assumption of loyal, disinterested friendship. It was no friendship. Those who had judged it by another name had judged rightly. He had come between husband and wife, he was at that very moment, willingly or unwillingly, playing the part of tempter in the devil's comedy.

"Nora," he began, "perhaps I have done you harm. Perhaps I ought not to have come to-night."

"I don't care!" she retorted recklessly. "I don't care whether anything is right or wrong. When you came I was desperate. I hate every one here. It is awful to feel that I belong to them. I want to get away from here—home, to England."

"Nora—for God's sake!" He was frightened now—of her and of himself. "You must not talk like that. Your home is here with your husband."

"It is not!" she retorted, in the same low, trembling voice. "It is in England—it can never be anywhere else. Oh, you don't know what I suffer!"

"I can guess. Why don't you tell Wolff everything? Why don't you confide in him?"

Everything in him revolted against his own words. They were spoken, not out of innermost conviction, but as a stern tribute to his honour, and the principles which were bred into his bone and blood.

"I have," she said, "but it was of no good. He could not help me—no one can. It is as he said—one must choose."

"Poor child!"

"I deserve it all. It is my punishment. I did wrong in marrying Wolff, I did wrong to make you suffer. And now I suffer——"

"Nora!" An immense tenderness crept into his voice. He heard it, and the next moment he had regained his self-control. He was ashamed of the rôle he had been about to play. "We must bear our lot," he said sternly.

The waltz, under cover of which their rapid conversation had taken place, died into silence, and close upon the momentary hush that followed, they heard the dull thud of a falling body, a crash of glass and a low hubbub, above which one loud angry voice was distinctly audible. Nora started to her feet. Whether she had recognised that voice, or whether she was led by some instinct, she did not know. Her heart was beating with fear and excitement.

"Something has happened!" she exclaimed. "Quick!"

Arnold followed her in the direction whence the sounds came. In one of the adjoining alcoves a little group of officers had collected, and as they approached near enough to see what was happening, Arnold turned to Nora and tried to draw her on one side.

"Don't go!" he said. "It is some silly quarrel! Let me see to it."

"No, no!" she returned hoarsely, and pushed forward to the outside of the circle. She saw Miles standing by the table; he was leaning on it as though for support, his dress was disordered, his features crimson with drink and passion. A young officer had hold of him by the arm and was evidently trying to hold him back. A few feet away Bauer was rearranging his collar, with an assumption of contemptuous calm. A red scar upon his cheek told its own story.

"You d——d liar!" Miles shrieked in English, struggling against the detaining hold upon his arm. "If it wasn't that they protected you I'd thrash you within an inch of your life!"

His opponent smiled scornfully.

"I do not care for boxing-matches in a ball-room." he said, "not even with an intoxicated Englishman. Captain von Ebberstein, I should be very glad if you would represent me in this matter."

The one elderly officer present bowed, and approached Miles, whom he also saluted with a faultless formality, which contrasted strikingly with the other's unsteady, excited movements.

"Perhaps the gentleman would kindly name his seconds," he said, speaking in broken English. "The continuation of this affair can then be arranged on a more becoming occasion."

Arnold tried to loosen Nora's grasp upon his arm.

"I must get him out of this somehow," he whispered. "They are trying to force him into a duel."

Miles, however, gave him no time to interfere.

"What the devil do you mean?" he demanded.

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"You felt yourself wounded in your honour and have avenged yourself by insulting this officer here. That can have but one meaning."

"I swear I don't know what you are talking about!"

"There are certain injuries for which there is but one remedy," was the cold explanation.

A light seemed to dawn over Miles's scarlet face. He burst into a high, wavering laugh.

"You think I am going to fight a duel? You think I'm going to make such a d——d fool of myself?" he demanded thickly.

The officers looked at each other in contemptuous silence. Bauer smiled and turned aside, as though to spare himself the sight of so profound a humiliation. Captain von Ebberstein alone retained his expression of profound gravity.

"A gentleman is expected to give satisfaction," he said.

"I don't care what you expect," was Miles's retort. "I'll have nothing to do with such infernal nonsense. He lied, and I choked the lie down his throat, and there's an end to the matter!"

"On the contrary, it is the beginning."

"I think differently."

Bauer advanced. He was swinging his white kid glove carelessly backwards and forwards, and there was the same scornful smile about his lips. At the same moment his eyes fell on Nora's

face, and the smile deepened with malicious satisfaction.

"In that case, it is my duty to inform you that you are neither a gentleman nor a man of honour," he said. "As such, and as a coward, you will feel no objection to my expressing my feelings—thus!"

He flung the glove full into Miles's face.

There was a moment of expectant silence. Miles appeared to ignore what had happened. The temporary excitement was over, and the wine was beginning to numb his senses with the first touch of drowsiness. It was Arnold's opportunity. He pushed through the little circle and took Miles firmly by the arm.

"Let me pass!" he said to those about him. "This gentleman is my friend."

Miles yielded passively, and no one made any effort to detain him. The group fell back on either side, as they would have done from people infected with disease, and Arnold guided the wavering Miles across the ballroom. The floor was empty, and Nora felt she must sink beneath the hundreds of eyes that watched them. Yet she carried herself haughtily, and the one thought that flashed clearly through her mind, as the great glass doors swung behind her, was that she was free—that, come what would, she could never see those people again. The last possibility of her existence amongst them was destroyed. Further than that she refused to think.

The drive home was an absolutely silent one. Miles, yielding to the influence of champagne and the late excitement, fell into a disturbed doze, from which Arnold and Nora made no attempt to arouse him. They sat opposite each other in the half-light, avoiding each other's eyes.

Thus they reached the gloomy little house which was Nora's home.

"I had better help him upstairs," Arnold said quietly. "We must make as little fuss as possible."

Nora consented with a brief inclination of the head. She was past all struggle against circumstances. Between them they succeeded in piloting Miles up the endless flights. He seemed, quite unconscious of his state, and talked loudly and incessantly, so that all hope of bringing him to his room unobserved was doomed as vain. Nevertheless, stunned and indifferent as she was, Nora started back involuntarily as Wolff met them in the passage. He carried a candle in his hand, and the light reflected on his pale, exhausted face fell also on Miles, and revealed enough of the truth. He glanced away at Nora, and from Nora to Arnold. His expression betrayed no feeling, but she felt that he was trying to read into the very depths of their souls.

"Please come in here," he said quietly.

He led the way into the drawing-room and switched on the light, and they followed him without protest.

"Tell me what happened," he commanded.

Arnold made a movement as though he would have spoken, but Wolff stopped him with a courteous but decided gesture.

"I wish Miles to tell me—if he can," he said.

Miles lifted his hanging head. A silly self-satisfaction twisted his unsteady lips.

"I can tell you right enough," he said, "only I'll sit down, if you don't mind, I feel so infernally shaky. It was Bauer, you know. I was having my supper when I heard him and another fellow talking, and though I'm not good at the jargon I caught the drift of what he was saying. It was about a woman. He said if he were her husband he would make an end of such a dirty scandal, and put a bullet through some one or other's head. You can fancy that I pricked up my ears, and I turned and saw that he was pointing at Nora and Arnold. That was too much for me. I got up and asked what he meant. He told me—and I swear it wasn't nice. He said——"

Wolff lifted his hand.

"I don't want to hear that," he said. "Go on."

"Well, I knocked him down, and there was the devil of a row!" Miles laughed unsteadily. "The silly fools wanted me to fight a duel over it!" he added.

"And you——?"

"I told them I wasn't going to make such a d——d idiot of myself."

Wolff said nothing for a moment. His whole face had stiffened, and he was looking at Miles from head to foot.

"And after that they called you a coward?" he asked, at last.

"Some rot like that——"

"And they were right. You are a coward—the vilest, most pitiful coward I have ever met."

"Wolff!"

It was Nora who had cried out. The insult had fallen on her brother and herself alike, and her

voice shook with passionate indignation.

Her husband turned to her.

"The man who is not ready to risk his life for his sister's honour *is* a coward," he asserted deliberately.

A gesture of protest escaped Arnold, who had hitherto remained silent and motionless.

"You forget," he said. "In England we do not duel—it is not our custom."

"No; you go to law and take money for your injured honour," was the coldly scornful answer. "That is the revenge of shopkeepers—not of gentlemen."

The two men measured each other in painful electric silence, and as they stood there face to face, the contrast between them marked them as two great types of two great races. The thin, loosely built Englishman, with the long, gaunt features, confronted the German, whose broad shoulders and massive head seemed to make him taller than his opponent. Perhaps some vague notion of the conflict which they represented dawned in Nora's mind. She looked from one to the other, terrified of the forces behind the masks of stern self-repression, and instinctively weighing them in a mental balance. For the first time in their married life she was afraid of her husband. It seemed to her that his height and breadth had increased in the last moments; there was something gigantic in the stature, and something bulldog, tenacious, and yet keenly alive, powerfully intellectual in the face, with its square chin and massive forehead. Compared with him, Arnold, tall and wiry though he was in reality, appeared enfeebled, almost fragile. If the two men had fallen upon each other in that moment—the very possibility sickened Nora's heart with fear. She had seen Arnold's hands clench themselves as Wolff's scornful criticism had been uttered, and involuntarily she had taken a quick step forward as though to fling herself between them. But there was no need for interference. Both men possessed admirable self-control, and in that moment at least they respected each other.

"We have our own opinions on these matters," Arnold said. "You have yours. Mr. Ingestre is an Englishman, and does not need to conform to your customs. He gave his opponent the lie, and has done all that he need do."

"So you have said," Wolff returned calmly. "In my eyes, and in the eyes of my world, there is still much to be done. But that—as the one German here—concerns me alone." He turned to Miles, who was still seated, his face in his hands, apparently dozing. "Go to your room!" he commanded peremptorily. The tone of almost brutal authority acted like a goad on Nora's tortured nerves.

"You speak to my brother as though he were a dog!" she burst out.

Wolff did not answer her.

"Go to your room!" he repeated.

Miles staggered to his feet and tottered across to the door. He seemed to be obeying the hypnotising power of Wolff's voice, for his movements were those of a sleep-walker.

"Good night, every one!" he mumbled. "Good night!"

No one responded. The two men again faced each other.

"I am grateful to you for the assistance you rendered my wife," Wolff said. "We shall scarcely meet again."

"Not here, at any rate," was the significant answer.

A curt salute, and Arnold turned away. He gave Nora his hand.

"Good-bye—and God bless you!" he said.

Her lips moved soundlessly. For an instant it seemed almost as though she clung to him. Then her hand fell listlessly to her side, and the next minute he too had gone.

Husband and wife did not speak. Nora seated herself at the table and buried her face in her arms. She cried without restraint, not loudly, but with low, monotonous, terrible sobs.

Her husband crossed to the door of his room. He stood there a moment, his head bowed, listening. It was as though he were receiving some final message from those sounds of piteous self-abandonment. But he did not look at Nora. He went out, and the soft click of the lock pierced through her grief, so that she started upright.

She saw that the door was closed, and that she was alone.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE SEA BETWEEN

To reach Wolff's study it was necessary to pass through the drawing-room. On his way, therefore, Captain von Seleneck encountered Nora, who was seated at her table writing. He bowed, she answered with a slight inclination of the head and he passed on, as a total stranger might have done, into the inner sanctuary.

He found Wolff at work on some nearly finished plans. He was standing over them, and with a compass measuring distances with a careful, painstaking exactitude, and his face, as he looked up, though haggard almost beyond belief, was absolutely determined, without trace of weakness.

The two men shook hands and Wolff went on working.

"It was good of you to come, Kurt," he said. "I know you must be overburdened with duty just now."

"One has always time for a comrade, and especially for you," was the answer; "and whether you had sent for me or not, I should have come—like a bird of ill-omen. I felt I owed it to you as your friend, and you would rather have it from me than from another man. It seems, though, you know all about last night?"

"Quite enough."

"It was a wretched affair," Seleneck said, placing his helmet on the table. "I got it from an eye-witness. Of course, your precious brother-in-law had had too much to drink. That was inevitable, and might have been hushed up. But then came the row with Bauer. It was obvious that Bauer was on the look-out for mischief, and I should like to give Mr. Ingestre the credit for knocking him down as a return for what he said about your wife. Unfortunately, the real subject of dispute was—money."

Wolff nodded.

"How did you hear of it?" he asked.

"Ebberstein came straight to me. It was rather decent of him. He knew, of course, that I was your friend, and the best person to tell you what had happened. It was obvious that you had to be told. You see—it was not only your brother-in-law. Your—wife's name and—and honour were dragged in."

Wolff's lips tightened.

"I know," he said. "Go on!"

"Well, we talked it over, and I promised to come round to you directly I was free. When I got back this morning I found your letter waiting for me, and here I am!" He laid his hand with an affectionate movement on his comrade's shoulder. "Whatever it is—I'm your man," he said.

"I know, *alter Junge*. You have always stuck to me. You were the one man in all Berlin to whom I felt I could turn with real confidence. By the way, I suppose I may leave the arrangement of things in your hands?"

"I shall be proud to act for you, Wolff. To all intents and purposes everything is settled. Ebberstein and I talked it over last night. In the almost certain event of your challenging, we decided that a Court of Honour should sit this evening in my house and that the meeting should take place at the latest to-morrow morning. It is impossible to know when we shall have marching-orders, so there must be no delay. If you wish it, I shall proceed at once to Bauer and find out whom he intends to appoint as seconds. The rest of the formalities you can safely entrust to me."

"Thank you. When is the Court of Honour appointed to sit?"

"If it can be managed, at six o'clock. The circumstances are simple enough, so that the conditions should be very quickly settled. You, of course, are the challenging party, and the matter will come under the head of '*schwere Beleidigung*,' so that ten paces will be about the outcome. Are you good at that distance?"

"Pretty well."

"Ebberstein says your man is a first-class shot. *Es heisst aufpassen*, Wolff!"

Arnim made no answer and his companion took up his helmet.

"I shall come round to you this evening as soon as the Court's decision has been given," he said.

Wolff looked up quickly.

"If you don't mind, I would prefer to come to you," he said. "And if I might, I will stay the night at your house. It would be better. I do not want my wife to know anything of what is to happen."

"But—*Menschenkind*! She *must* know!"

"She suspects nothing. You forget—she is not one of us. She does not understand."

Seleneck stared thoughtfully in front of him, pulling his moustache as though a prey to some

painful uneasiness.

"Of course I hope the very best for you, Wolff," he said, at last, "but you are a big man, and unlucky accidents happen. It would be pretty hard on your wife if she knew nothing and——"

"It would be a shock," interrupted Wolff quietly. "I know that. Believe me, though, what I have arranged is for the best. She would not understand."

Seleneck asked none of the questions that were burning the tip of his tongue. A natural delicacy, above all, his comrade's face, held him silent, and it was Wolff who continued after a moment:

"In the event of what you call an 'unlucky accident' my wife will, of course, return to her own country. Her brother is starting for England to-morrow, so that she will be able to accompany him. But in any case—whether I fall or not—I beg of you to do your utmost to shield her from all trouble—and scandal. She is innocent—absolutely innocent. I know—you cannot hide it from me—that you and all the rest blame her. She is not to be blamed because she married a man not of her own people. She is to be profoundly pitied. That is all, and it explains everything."

"You talk as though you were certain of the worst," Seleneck said. "But if everything goes well—what then?"

The compasses slipped from Wolff's fingers.

"God knows!" he said.

It was no exclamation of despair, rather a reverent surrender of a life which he could no longer shape alone, and Seleneck turned aside, more deeply moved than he cared to show. He had known Wolff from the earliest *Kadetten* days, and had watched the dawn of great promise break into a day of seeming fulfilment. With unchanging, unenvying friendship he had followed the brilliant career, admiring the boy's ambition ripening to steadfast purpose, the boyish spirits steadying to a bold and fearless optimism. And, after all, he ended as others ended—in shipwreck—only more tragically, with the port of Victory in sight. Seleneck remembered his own words spoken only a few months before: "Take care that you do not end as Field-Marshal with Disappointment for an Adjutant!" And Wolff was not even major, and something worse than Disappointment, something that was more like Catastrophe, had already chosen him as comrade.

Against Wolff's wish, Seleneck blamed Nora bitterly. He held her responsible for every shadow that had fallen upon the hopeful life, but he swore to himself that she should not know it, and that he would prove her friend for her husband's sake, whatever befell.

"My will is, of course, made," Wolff said, breaking upon his troubled reflections, "and here is a letter to my aunt and Hildegarde; please give it to them in the event of my death."

"And for your wife?"

"This other letter is for her."

Seleneck took the two envelopes and put them in his pocket.

"I think everything is settled now?" he said.

"Everything. I shall work at these plans as long as possible, and if I get them finished I shall take them to Colonel von Beck before I come to you. If not, I shall leave them locked in here and bring you the key. If anything happens to me, you will know where to find them. They are of some importance, and I would be grateful if you would see to it that they are taken at once to head-quarters."

"Pray Heaven you may be able to take them yourself!" Seleneck returned earnestly.

Wolff made no answer, but he straightened his shoulders and held out a steady hand.

"In any case, thank you for your friendship, Kurt," he said. "It has been the best—no, almost the best thing in my life."

That loyal correction touched the elder man profoundly, and for the first time a faint trace of emotion relaxed Wolff's set features.

"Do not let my wife suspect that anything serious has passed between us," he added. "She suffers enough."

The two men embraced, and Seleneck went out of the room with his brows knitted in bitter, painful lines. He did not wish to see Wolff's wife, much less speak with her, but she was still seated by the table, and as he entered she rose as though she had been waiting for him. She did not offer him her hand, and in spite of all his resolutions he felt that the enmity and distrust were in his eyes as he waited for her to speak.

"Has anything happened?" she asked breathlessly.

If he could have forgotten his friend's face, he might have pitied her in that moment. Only a few months had passed since he had welcomed the girlish bride on the Karlsburg platform, and now all the girlhood had gone. She looked old as she stood there—pitiably old, because the age

lay only in the expression, which was bitter, miserable, and reckless.

"What should have happened, *gnädige Frau*?" Seleneck answered, parrying her question with an indifference which concealed a very real anxiety. He could not free himself from the conviction that she knew. He could not imagine it possible that she was ignorant of the consequences of the last night's catastrophe.

"You know very well what I mean!" Nora said roughly. "I ask you because you must know. Will there be war?"

Seleneck nearly laughed. So much for his sharp-sightedness! She had not been thinking of her husband, but of herself; or was perhaps the fear written on her face, fear for his safety? He did not believe it. He was too bitter against her to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"I know no more than you know, *gnädige Frau*," he said. "Our ultimatum has been sent to England. The next twenty-four hours must decide."

"But surely you have an idea—surely you can guess?"

"*Gnädige Frau*, we soldiers are not politicians. We are ready to march when the order is given. That is the only point with which we are concerned."

He waited an instant, and then, as she did not answer, he clapped his spurred heels together and went.

Nora crept back to her place at the table. Her movements were like those of a woman who has struggled up from a severe illness, and as she sat there with the pen in her listless hand she asked herself if this feeling of deadly physical inertia were not indeed the forerunner of the definite breakdown of her whole strength. Alone her thoughts seemed alive, to be indued with an agonising vitality which left her no peace or rest. They had followed her through the short night hours of sleep, and they pursued her now till she could have cried out with pain and despair. They were not thoughts that helped her, or sought a way for her out of the problem of her life. They were of the kind that haunt the fevered mind in dreams, pictures of the past and of the future that slipped across her mental vision in kaleidoscopic confusion, only to return again and again with hideous persistency. She could not control them; she sat there and yielded herself listlessly to their torture, leaving to Fate the whole guidance of the future. She had no plans of her own. Once it had occurred to her to write to her mother, but she had not traced more than the first few lines before the pen fell from her hand. Pride, rather than love, held her back from the bitter confession of her wretchedness. The thought of her father's triumph and her mother's grief had been sufficient to turn her away from the one path which still remained open to her.

Thus her thoughts continued their round, and the winter dusk deepened to evening. The servant had forgotten to attend to the stove, and a bitter penetrating cold ate into her very heart. She cared too little to move. She sat with her chin resting on her hand and watched the snow that was beginning to fall in the quiet street. Winter—in a few days Christmas! The thoughts took a swift turn. A year ago she had been at home, fighting with the courage of her youth for what she deemed her happiness. A year ago she had slept—foolish child!—with Wolff's last letter beneath her pillow and sworn to it that, come what might, she would trample on home and people and country, and follow him whithersoever he would lead her. "Thy people shall be my people, thy God my God!" A year ago—no more than that! And now she sat alone, and the door was locked between them.

She listened intently, and again her thoughts changed their course. What was he doing? Was he, too, sitting alone, as she sat, with his face between his hands, gazing into the ruin of his life's happiness? A wave of pity, even of tenderness, passed like a thawing breath over her frozen misery. Could she not go to him and put her arms about his shoulders, and plead with him, "Let all be good between us! Take me away from here to the other end of the earth and let us forget! I cannot bear to suffer thus, nor to see you suffer!" Surely it was not too late.

Urged by a hope born of her despair, she rose quickly and went to his door. She heard him move; there was a sound of papers being turned over, the clatter of keys, a short sigh of satisfaction, and then slow steps approaching from the other side. Her hand, raised in the act of knocking, fell paralysed. The next instant she was back at her table writing—what and to whom she never knew. But she was laughing to herself—that piteous heart-rending laughter of those who find in themselves the butt for the bitterest mockery. He had been working. Not for an instant had he been thrown out of his course by the storm which was threatening her with total shipwreck. He had gone on with his plans, his maps, his calculations as though nothing had happened, as though she were no more than an episode in his life. He did not care for her suffering—or what was worse, he did not know, so complete was the severance of their union.

A year ago! It might have been ten years, ten ages. The moment when he had held her in his

arms for the first time might have been a dream and this the reality, grim, cold, and intolerable. She heard the key turn in the lock, the crack of the door as it opened. She heard Wolff's heavy step on the parquette, and then once more the closing of the door and the noise of the key twice turned and withdrawn. Then silence. She went on writing—words that had no meaning. Her pulses were at the gallop with suspense, fear, and an emotion which she did not stop to analyse. They had not met since the night before. What would he say to her—or she to him?

"How cold it is!" he said quietly. "The fire has gone out. You must be freezing!"

She did not lift her head for a moment, so startled was she by the perfect equanimity of his words and tone. And yet it was what she might have expected. It was all in perfect harmony with his whole character, with his whole conduct. He had seen the last link between them break and had gone back to his room and worked steadily throughout the night, and now he came and talked to her—about the fire!

"Johann is out," he went on, "but I dare say I can manage."

She turned then, and looked at him. He was kneeling by the stove trying to rekindle the dying embers with some sticks he had found in the coal-scuttle. He had changed his clothes for his full uniform, and the helmet with the plume lay at his side on the floor, together with the sword and white kid gloves. A bitter, sarcastic smile relaxed Nora's set lips. She wondered that it had never struck her before how prosaic, almost plebeian he was. The splendid clothes had, after all, only been the gilt covering to a piece of machinery working in blind accordance with thousands of others in its one great task—a dull, brute thing, for whom the finer emotions were a sealed book. She saw him in a new light as he knelt there, his shadow thrown up against the wall by the rekindling fire. She felt as though he were a total stranger against whom she felt an increasing antagonism.

Presently he rose, dusting his hands on his handkerchief.

"I think it will do now," he said. "Do you want the light? You can't possibly see."

"I would rather be as I am," she answered coldly.

She covered her face with her hand and appeared to forget his presence. But in a rapid, inexplicable revulsion of feeling, the first fear and suspense returned, and though she did not see him she followed his every movement, her ears translating every sound with the precision of a second-sight. She heard him pick up sword and helmet, then the soft, familiar click of his spurs as he crossed the room to the farther door. Then the sound stopped, and she knew that he was looking at her. The silence seemed to last an eternity. It suffocated her; she felt that if it lasted another instant she must scream out, so frightful was the strain, and yet, when as though obeying an irresistible behest he came back upon his steps and put his hand upon her shoulder, she prayed for that silence to come back, anything rather than that he should speak to her.

"*Gott segne dich und behüte dich, meine Frau!*" he said, and bent and kissed her hand.

That was all. The next minute the loud clang of the outer door told her that he had gone.

For a long time she sat as though paralysed, listening to the words as they echoed through her memory. He had spoken in German—as he never did save in moments of deep feeling—and there had been something in his voice which she had never heard before. She sprang to her feet. The earlier lassitude and indifference were over, she felt as though every nerve in her body had been drawn taut by some nameless, indefinable fear.

"Wolff!" she cried. "Wolff!"

She knew that he was out of hearing. She knew that if he stood before her in that moment she would turn from him with the same coldness, the same anger. Yet she called for him despairingly, and when she put her hand to her face she found that it was wet with tears.

"Wolff!" she repeated. "Wolff!"

The answering silence appalled her. She ran out into the passage to Miles's door and knocked urgently. She did not know what she wanted of him. She only knew that she could not bear to be alone.

After what seemed a moment's hesitation the bolt was drawn, and Miles's flushed face appeared in the aperture. He looked curiously relieved when he saw who his visitor was.

"What is it?" he demanded curtly. "I am busy packing."

His tone gave her back her self-possession—or the appearance of self-possession.

"I only wanted to know if you were at home," she said. "I—am going out for a little."

The idea had come to her as she spoke. The confusion and noise of the streets seemed to offer to her the sole antidote for the feverish restlessness which had come over her.

Miles nodded.

"All right. Where—where is Wolff?"

The light was behind him, and she could not see his face. Nevertheless she felt that the expression in his eyes was tense, excited, that he was studying her as though on her answer depended more than she guessed.

"He has just gone out."

"Thanks. How long will you be?"

"I don't know. I am only going to get fresh air."

"You might go towards the Kriegsministerium," Miles suggested carelessly. "You might hear if there is any answer come from home. War may be declared at any minute."

Nora made no answer. His words had set her heart beating with pain, and the pain increased as five minutes later she found herself being swept along in the stream of the crowd. Everything was very quiet. It seemed to her that not one of those with whom she was borne forward spoke. A silence, ominous as the hush before the storm, weighed upon all, and only the faces coming and going out of the circles of lamp-light revealed the forces of passion which were awaiting the hour when they should be set free. After the first moment, Nora ceased to notice all this. She was winged with a panting, rapidly increasing anxiety which obliterated everything—even to her own personality. She forgot Wolff, she forgot herself and the conflict before her; she had become an atom in one mighty community with whose existence her own was irrevocably bound. She was no longer Wolff's wife, she was not even Nora Ingestre; she was English, and, as though from far away a voice called her by some all-powerful incantation, she forced her way forward. War! Her heart exulted. War! Her excited imagination transported her to the centre of another and a greater city; she felt closed in on every side by a people whose blood was hers; she heard their voices, a magic stream of sympathy poured from them to her; she heard the tramp of a thousand feet, the clash of martial music, the roar of cheering, and in the brilliant light bayonets flashed like a moving ribbon of silver. War! And if War—why then, Victory, her country's final, grandest triumph!

The dream vanished—nay, became a reality with another meaning, which for a moment she could not comprehend. The crowd about her swayed, hesitated, and eddied like a stream that has been checked by some unexpected force. A low murmur rose like the first breath of the hurricane.

"What is it?" Nora asked. "What has happened?"

She forgot where she was. She spoke in English, and the man next her answered as though he understood, as though he had not even noticed that she had addressed him in a foreign language. His young face was crimson with exultation.

"They say there is to be war!" he answered hoarsely. "They say there is to be war!"

And then she understood, then the reality of it bore down upon her with the crushing weight of a horrible revelation. She tried to force a passage for herself out of this crowd of enemies, but like a straw in the swirl of a whirlpool she was swept back. And in that moment of helplessness the hatred which had lain smouldering burst into full flame in Nora's heart. Reckless and defiant, she fought against the seething mass of humanity, and for her the struggle was a real thing. She pitted herself against them all; alone amongst those thousands, she felt herself indued with superhuman strength and courage. In her exultation she could have cried aloud: "You fools, you poor fools, who dare to rise against US—US, the elect of God among the nations!"

It was a moment prescient of victory, unshadowed by a single doubt or fear. A moment! Then the murmur burst into a great shout, the crowd broke asunder, and to the rattle of drums, the shrill voice of the pipes, a regiment of Infantry passed through, the thunder of their march sounding like some mighty accompaniment to the high notes of the warlike music. No confusion, no hurry, the officers at the head of their companies, grave, resolute, filled with the consciousness of their great calling; the men silent, their eyes fixed ahead as though the enemy lay straight before them, awaiting the final struggle. What it was Nora could not, in that moment of conflicting emotion, clearly analyse. Something had fallen like an icy hand upon her courage. Those faces that passed so close to her through the driving snow, column after column, those healthy, weather-beaten faces so full of life and strength, those broad-shouldered figures, erect, sturdy, swinging forward as though one soul, one mind governed each and all alike—they had made her afraid. She felt herself flung back by a huge pitiless Juggernaut, before which her strength broke like a frail reed. She turned away, sick and trembling, and as she did so her eyes fell on the man who had retained his place at her side.

"*Ach, du lieber Gott!*" he said, as though she had spoken to him. "That was my regiment—the 115th. Perhaps I shall be called in—I also have been a soldier."

She looked at him and she understood. He, too, was *Soldat*, he too could carry his gun and

take his place with the best, he too had been taught to bear his share worthily in the highest of all human callings—one saw the pride of it in his face. And he was not alone. He was typical of all, of a whole nation in arms.

A sort of panic seized her. She turned and fled, thrusting her way through the thinning crowd with the strength of despair. Only one thought possessed her—to get away, to escape from a force which she had learnt to fear. Panting, disordered, scarcely knowing what she did or meant to do, she reached her home at last. Silence greeted her—silence and an absolute darkness. She entered the drawing-room and turned on the light. No one. Her husband's door, locked when she had gone out, stood wide open.

"Wolff!" she called. Her voice shook. She called again, and then her brother's name, but the silence remained unbroken. She looked about her, and her eyes chanced to rest an instant on her table; she saw that a letter was lying on the blotting-case, which had not been there before. She ran and picked it up. It was addressed to her in Miles's handwriting.

"Johann has just run in to look for Wolff," he scrawled. "He says war is declared, and I'm off. There is a train leaving at eight, and I have no time to lose. Sorry I can't say good-bye, old girl. I wish you could come, but I suppose you can't. We'll come and fetch you though, never fear!"

A cry broke from Nora's trembling lips. He had gone—he had left her. He had the right to go! And she was alone. She looked at the clock ticking peacefully on the mantelpiece. She had no clear plan, but she saw that it was half-past seven, and she reckoned that the Potsdamer Bahnhof could not be more than twenty minutes away. If she could get a cab there would be time. For what? She did not know. She was still panic-stricken. The silence oppressed her with a greater horror than the roaring of the crowd. The little room, with its cheap, ugly ornaments, had become absolutely unfamiliar to her. She felt that it was impossible she could ever have lived here, she felt that she had wandered into a stranger's house, and that he might come back any minute and find her. She ran to the door. No bond, no link of memory or past happiness held her back. Not even the grey *Litewka* hanging in the hall, with its silent reminder, could change the headlong course of her resolution. She saw it, she even stopped to look at it. It spoke to her of a man she had known long ago, who had gone out of her life and was no more than the memory of a dream. Because it had been a beautiful dream she bent and kissed the empty sleeve, but she did not hesitate, and her eyes were tearless. Stronger than that memory was the craving for home and the fear of the stranger who would return and find her. Thus she fled, and the door of the little flat closed with a melancholy clang. It was empty now—when the stranger came there would be no one there to trouble his peace. She felt neither remorse nor pity. All that had been love for her husband had turned to bitterness. He had come between her and those dear to her; he had insulted her and her whole nation; he had trampled on her pride; he had deserted her, leaving her to fight her battle alone, whilst he had followed his ambition behind locked doors, which even she could not open. As she drove rapidly through the streets he stood before her mental vision, not as the lover or the husband, but as the man who had faced her on the preceding night, stern, resolute, pitiless, sweeping her from his path as he would have done a valueless toy. He had had no thought for her sufferings, he had not even tried to comfort her, but had gone to his room and —worked. And between this man of iron and routine and the immense implacable force which had revealed itself to her in the crowd, there was a resemblance, nay, an affinity of mind and purpose. Both threatened her home, her people, and her life. She hated both.

Twenty minutes later she stood in the crowded railway-station. Miles was nowhere to be seen. There were only three minutes left before the train started, and she had not money enough in her purse to take her even to the coast. Tears of helpless wretchedness rushed to her eyes. She must go—she must escape. She could never return to the silent, dreary home, to the man who had become a hated stranger.

On every side she heard the same words, "*Der Krieg! Der Krieg!*" They terrified her, exasperated her. A little crowd of English people, who were hurrying to the train, arrested her attention.

"We should have left before," one of them said. "All the places will be taken."

In her despair she could have flung herself upon their mercy, but the crowd jostled her on one side, and they were lost to sight.

"*Alles einsteigen! Alles einsteigen!*"

It was then she saw Miles; just for one instant she saw his face. It stood out clearly in the blur —white, aghast, full of a terrified recognition, and then, as she held out her hands, too thankful to think what it all meant, it disappeared.

She stood there, stupefied, rooted to the ground. He had deserted her—he had been afraid of

her. Why? What had happened?

"*Alles einsteigen! Alles einsteigen!*"

A sob broke from Nora's lips, and even in that moment, in which all hope seemed lost, Arnold stood at her side. She clung to him recklessly, like a child who has been pursued by the phantom of some hideous nightmare.

"Oh, take me with you, Robert!" she cried. "Don't leave me!"

He looked down at her, then, without speaking, he lifted her into the already moving train and sprang in after her.

"There is nothing to be afraid of, little Nora," he said tenderly. "I will bring you home safe and sound."

The word "home" swept aside the last barricades of her self-control. She flung herself into his arms weeping wildly and thankfully.

* * * * *

As the dawn broke, Nora stood at the prow of the vessel that was bearing her homewards, and welcomed the white bulwarks of England as they rose in majestic sovereignty out of the morning mists. Her eyes filled. She could have stretched out her arms in her pride and joy, and the whole world that she had left behind had vanished like some delirious dream.

Miles away, in a quiet field on the outskirts of Berlin, two men faced each other at ten paces' distance, and awaited the signal. It was given, and two puffs of smoke issued from the outstretched weapons, and curled slowly upwards into the frosty air. One of the men reeled and fell, and lay quiet, with his face in the grass.

They picked him up tenderly, and as they bore him thence his fading eyes opened.

"Do—not frighten her," he whispered. "Don't let her think that it is anything—serious——"

In the same instant, Nora had turned joyously to the man at her side.

"Oh, thank God!" she cried. "Thank God, I am home at last!"

Thus she returned to her own country and her own people, and a sea rolled between her and all that had been.

END OF BOOK II.

## BOOK III

## THE BRIDGE

### CHAPTER I
#### HOME

Mrs. Ingestre's bed had been drawn to the window, so that she could look out on to the drear landscape of snow-covered fields and catch the few rays of sunshine that here and there broke through the grey monotony of sky. It was her last stand against the shadow which was soon to blot out the whole world for ever from her eyes. There she had lain day after day, and with her imagination brightened the bleak outlook with the summer sunshine and the green trees which she was to see no more. There she had written cheery, hopeful letters to her daughter and had received cheery, hopeful letters in return. There mother and daughter, clasped in each other's arms, acknowledged that the letters had been no more than merciful lies, that the hope they had expressed had been disguised despair.

"How blind I must have been!" Mrs. Ingestre thought, as Nora, kneeling at her bedside, poured out the story of her short married happiness. "How blind not to have seen and understood!"

"How heartless, how self-absorbed I was not to have known!" Nora reproached herself, as she looked into the well-loved face on which death had set his unmistakable seal.

But it was not of death which they spoke. It was as though the elder woman's life was already closed, as though she already stood afar off and saw the world and life with other and clearer eyes. There was no regret or fear in her attitude towards the unknown future, and that calm, high

confidence inspired Nora with a curious awe which hushed all tears and passionate grief. She looked up to her mother as to a being high above all earthly sorrow, yet linked to the world by an infinite, all-comprehending pity. That pity was Nora's one refuge. The wild delight which had borne her up through that long night journey had died almost in the same hour that her father had clasped her in his arms and killed the fatted calf in honour of the long-despaired-of prodigal. Something like an icy disappointment had crept into her aching heart as she had woken the first morning in her girlhood's room and realised that this was her home, the home she had longed and prayed for, in which she had chosen to pass her life. She had laughed scorn at herself and had greeted the hideous church-spire which peered over the leafless trees with a seeming new-born affection, and to her father and brother she maintained that same seeming of delight and thankfulness. Before her mother she had broken down for a moment, and the stormy sobs which had shaken her had not wholly been the expression of a pent-up longing. She had recovered herself almost at once, the grave, clear eyes of the dying woman warning her, perhaps, that her secret was no longer entirely hidden, and now she knelt and told her story as she would have told it twenty-four hours before, with bitterness, resentment, and self-pity.

"It was all a dreadful mistake, mother," she said. "I believed I loved him enough to forget whom and what I was, but I could not. Every hour showed me that I was a stranger, and would always remain a stranger. I could not grow to love his people, and they hated me. You don't know how they hated me. When trouble began and there came the first rumour of war, they did not let a chance pass to hurt me. There were moments when I felt I could bear it no longer, but I held out until that night. Then—when I was in that crowd, and heard them cheering, and knew that it was against me—against us—I knew that I could never go back, that the strain of pretending or trying to pretend would send me mad. And oh, I longed so for my home and for you all! It was just as though I were in some frightful exile among enemies——"

"So you escaped," Mrs. Ingestre interrupted gently. "It was natural, and yet——"

Nora looked into her mother's face, and wondered at the depth of pity which the low voice had betrayed.

"And yet——?" she asked.

"I was thinking of Wolff," Mrs. Ingestre said. "He must have suffered terribly."

"Wolff!" The name burst almost angrily from Nora's lips. "How should he have suffered? Men of his stamp do not suffer. They have no room in their lives for such a feeling. Do you know—after that ball, when he had practically thrown Miles out of the house, when he knew that I was miserable, broken-hearted, he left me without a word, and worked with his door locked between us. He cared nothing—nothing—only for his ambition and himself. They are all like that, and their wives are just their servants, who must be satisfied with whatever is left over for them. *I* could not stand it. It was like living with some piece of machinery——"

"Nora, he is your husband, and you loved him!"

Nora sprang to her feet. The reproach had stung her, the more so because at the bottom she knew that her indignation was feigned. The panic and delirium of that night was over, and left her terribly calm, terribly cold, terribly clear as to what she had done.

"I did love him," she said—"or at least I thought I did. It is all the same thing. I was carried off my feet by the strangeness and newness of it all. How should I have known then what it meant to leave one's country and one's people? Leave them! If that had been all! But to go against them, to have to forget that one had ever loved them!"

She was trying to rouse herself to those feelings which had been the cause of all her past misery and whose crisis had brought about the final desperate action. She was trying to rouse in her mother sympathy for those feelings, and it goaded her to know that both efforts failed. Mrs. Ingestre was gazing out of the window, and her pale face was still grave and pitiful.

"You see things with your own eyes, my Nora," she said, with a faint, wistful smile. "I see them from a long way off, and with eyes that suffering has cleared from all prejudice and hatred. And then—I was very fond of Wolff."

Nora turned away, her small hands clenched.

"That—that means I have done wrong?" she said almost fiercely.

"Have I blamed you?"

"No, but——"

"I can have pity for both, Nora. I can see that you had much to bear—perhaps more than was tolerable for one so young and headstrong. But I can see Wolff's side too. I can see him come home that night and find you gone——"

She stopped as though her imagination had led her before a sorrow for which she found no

words, and Nora too was silent. Profoundly embittered and disappointed, she stood looking at the still beautiful face of the woman in whose sympathy she had had implicit trust. Was, then, everything to fail her, even in her home, the home which she had seen in her exile's dreams? Was she to stand alone? Was there no one who would understand her and all that she had endured?

"When Miles believed that war had broken out he would not stay an hour longer," she said at last, and her voice had a defiant note. "He could not bear to be away from his own country. Why should I, because I am a woman, feel less than he?"

"Because you are a woman, and because you feel more, the greater sacrifice is asked of you," was the quiet answer. "In this life there is always some one who must bring the sacrifice, and it is always the one who feels deepest and loves most. That is why it is ordained that women should suffer for their children, and often for their husbands. It seems at first sight unjust. It is really the greatest compliment which God and Nature can pay us."

"And I am unworthy of that compliment?" Nora demanded hotly.

"You will go back, Nora."

"To my husband? Never." For the first time she spoke with real conviction, with an almost despairing conviction, "That is impossible. You do not know how impossible. Even if I would, Wolff would not take me back. He said so himself. I had to choose once and for all, and I have chosen. And, besides, there are the others—the people I know; stiff, straitlaced people who would never understand and never forgive."

"Nevertheless, when the war is over you will go back," Mrs. Ingestre persisted steadily. "You will go back and bravely take up the work which lies before you—the work of reconciliation. You will fight the unhappy influence of the narrow-hearted fools and braggarts who have helped to bring catastrophe in your life and upon whole nations. You will retain your independence, your strength, your character; but in opening your heart to the goodness and strength in others you will bind them to you as no weak surrender could ever have done; you will win a greater, nobler victory than any victory won with the blood of men; you will build a bridge between Wolff's heart and yours; you will help build the bridge between the country of your birth and the country of your adoption!"

Her voice rang triumphant, prophetic. For one brief moment Mrs. Ingestre, dying though she was, called back her lost youth and rose to the heights of youth's hope and faith.

Nora took a deep breath.

"What can I do—a woman against thousands?" she demanded.

"Your best—your duty."

"I have tried, and I have failed. I have no power to build the bridge——"

Her mother's eyes rested on her face, and in their depths there was a serene confidence.

"God has given you the power," she said gently. "God has given you an instrument which cannot fail you. My Nora"—her voice failed her an instant—"a little child shall lead them"—she finished from afar off.

Nora covered her face with her hands.

"It is too late," she said huskily. "Not even that can help me now."

Her mother made no answer. She lay still with closed eyes, and a peaceful smile smoothed away the lines of pain from the sweet mouth. She was so quiet and the smile was so unchanging, so full of an almost unearthly wisdom, that every protest died in Nora's heart. She crept nearer to the bedside, awe-struck and afraid, as though already the curtain had fallen which was to divide them in the future life.

"Mother!" she whispered faintly.

The serene eyes opened, the smile became infinitely tender.

"My little girl—leave me now. I am so tired, so weary. I shall be glad to sleep. Remember what I said. Kiss me."

Nora obeyed. For one instant she lay like a child in the feeble arms, overwhelmed by a frightful forewarning of a pain she was yet to know in all its intensity.

"Good night, my darling," Mrs. Ingestre whispered.

Nora crept softly away. She thought that her mother had spoken from amidst her dreams and had forgotten that it was still daylight. Yet the tender farewell haunted her as she went downstairs, and it haunted her long afterwards, when the speaker's face was obscured in the shadows of memory.

She found her father in the old familiar dining-room, waiting for her. The months had made his shoulders more stooping, his manner feebler, more helpless. He looked so really wretched that she forgot her own grief and put her arms about him and kissed him.

"What is she doing?" he whispered, as though they stood in the invalid's room. "Is she asleep?"

Nora nodded.

"Yes; I think so. Our talking made her very tired."

A groan escaped from the man's quivering lips.

"The doctor said we must be prepared any moment for the worst," he said. "It is awful—I can scarcely bring myself to believe that it is God's will. How can I live without her?"

"We must help each other. And we must make the last days happy."

"Yes, yes; we must try," he agreed, beginning to pace restlessly backwards and forwards. "We must make her happy. Nora——" He stopped and looked piteously at her over his spectacles. "Nora, you think she was happy?"

"Happy?" she echoed. Somehow, the thought of her mother's happiness had scarcely ever occurred to her.

"I mean—I have been thinking, since I knew that we were to lose her, that she would have been happier in another sort of life—that I did not think enough about her: I was always so busy with the poor and the parish. It is perhaps foolish of me. A man of sensitive conscience is liable to unreasonable remorse. I should be glad—I should be easier in my mind if you gave me your opinion."

"Mother never complained," Nora said slowly.

He nodded, as though her words had confirmed his protests against his own self-reproach.

"No; she never complained," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. For a moment he was silent, then he turned to her again. "I cannot tell you how glad I am that you are here," he went on. "Weeks ago, when your mother became so ill, I wanted to send for you both—you and Miles—but she would not let me. Miles worried her, and she did not want your first months of married life overshadowed. Those were her very words. It seems almost providential that this war should have brought you home in time."

"What news is there?" she asked quickly. "Is it really declared at last?"

"Surely, surely!" her father said. "The rumour was only a little in advance. It must come to war; there is no possible alternative. We have gone too far to draw back. But there is the squire, and Miles with him. Probably they are bringing the news."

He went to the French window and threw it open, so that the new-comers could come in straight from the garden. Nora hung back, though her pulses were beating with excitement. The news that the declaration had been a false alarm, picked up with a reckless haste by Miles—perhaps for his own reasons—had not shaken her from her purpose. Arnold had assured her that it was only a question of hours before the rumour became truth, and she had believed him. But there had been a strange delay, a strange hush; there had been a talk of "negotiations," and it had made her afraid. She did not know of what she was afraid—whether it was of the war or of peace. She only knew that the uncertainty was unbearable. As she saw the squire, she knew that, one way or the other, the die was cast. Fury and indignation were written on every feature of the big, clean-shaven face; the small eyes, sunken under the bushy brows, glistened like two dangerous points of fire; the lips were compressed till they were almost colourless.

For a moment he stood in the narrow doorway, his huge shoulders spreading from side to side, glaring into the room as though he sought his deadliest enemy. Then, as he saw the unspoken question with which the occupants greeted him, he nodded and, entering, flung his riding-crop on to the table with a loud, ringing curse.

The Rev. John glanced anxiously at the ceiling, as though he thought his wife might have heard, and the squire, catching the movement, hastened to apologise.

"'Pon my word, I didn't mean to make such an infernal row," he said. "If I hadn't done something of the sort I should have had a fit. It's enough to send a man down into his grave with disgust. It's enough to make a man shake the dust off his boots and—and——" He stopped, stuttering with passion, and the Rev. John turned involuntarily to Miles, who had followed the squire into the room and was standing with his hands in his pockets, gazing sulkily at the floor.

"We've thrown up the sponge," he said, as though he knew he had been appealed to. "We've eaten humble pie, and the war's off. That's all."

"Yes, that's all!" the squire burst out. "An English Fashoda—that's all! We're the laughing-stock of Europe with our threats and demands, and then this d——d surrender. They call it a compromise. It's not what I call it. We've just licked their dirty boots—and I'd like to see every man-jack of the Government hanged and quartered!"

He was almost unintelligible in his fury, and the Rev. John made a mild gesture of protest.

"As a man of peace, I must rejoice," he said.

"As an Englishman, I curse!" the squire retorted, shaking his fist in the air. "It was a cowardly thing to do. We were ready and waiting for war. Every man of us had put his best foot forward. All my young fellows were learning to shoot and ride—I spent a small fortune on 'em; and now, what's the good? Their time and my money thrown clean away, and the humiliation of it all into the bargain! And to think we might have thrashed those confounded ruffians and settled them once and for all!"

He paced up and down, grinding his teeth, and Nora's eyes followed him with a critical wonder. By a swift turn of the imagination, she was again in that huge crowd, watching company after company of trained men as they tramped past in stern, resolute silence. Was it possible that this great blundering squire could talk of thrashing that mighty force with men who were learning to shoot and ride? Was it possible that she had ever thought as he thought?

He stopped in front of her, with his legs apart, and fixed her with a fierce, choleric stare.

"Come now, Miss Nora," he said, "you have been out there and know the blackguards. You must have hated 'em pretty well to have thrown up everything and come home?"

Something like an electric shock passed through Nora's body.

"I—hate them?" she stammered.

"Yes; Miles has been telling me the whole story. No offence meant, of course; but between such old friends as you and I, it was a d——d mistake to have married that foreign fellow. I always said so, didn't I, Parson?"

The Rev. John sighed resignedly.

"I said so myself," he answered; "but they were so determined that I could do nothing. It was a terrible blow to me."

"It made me sick when I was there," Miles interposed viciously, "to think that I had to be civil to those boors because my sister had married one of them. I tell you, I blessed the war. It gave one the chance to pay back."

"You! What could *you* have done?"

The question came from Nora, and her voice sounded curiously unsteady.

Miles nodded.

"I could have done a lot more than you think, my dear sister," he said pointedly. "I could have put more than one spoke in your fine baron's wheel if I had chosen. And glad I should have been to have done it—swaggering bully that he was!"

"Miles—you forget—you are speaking of my husband!"

She was leaning a little forward. Her cheeks were hot and her eyes alight with a passion which should have warned him. But Miles merely laughed.

"Your husband? My dear girl, I expect he has divorced you by now as a runaway and I don't know what else besides. They are pretty summary with that sort of thing in the Fatherland. Imagine"—he turned to the squire—"they treat their women-folk like underpaid servants. The fine gentlemen go about in their many-coloured coats, and the wives can patch together what they can on nothing a year. Poor wretches!"

"They don't mind," Nora put in sharply.

"It wouldn't make much difference if they did. And you needn't take up the cudgels like that! You grumbled enough that time Wolff said you couldn't have a new dress for the Hulsons' ball!"

"He gave it me," she retorted, in the same tone of repressed irritation.

"Yes; after you had worried enough. But I doubt very much if you would have got it if I hadn't been there to back you up. And the insolence of those fellows! He as good as called Arnold and me a pack of cowards because we wouldn't have anything to do with their idiotic duelling. As though we didn't know what a farce it all was! Whew! I am glad we are both well out of it, and I wish to goodness we could have given them a lesson they would not have forgotten in a hurry."

"A bully is always a coward," the Rev. John said sententiously. "I have always heard those Prussians were terrible bullies."

"I should think they are!" Miles agreed. "To hear my dear brother-in-law talk, one would have supposed that I was a raw recruit, or some inferior beast. I held my tongue for Nora's sake, but I tell you, there were moments——" He clenched his fist significantly, and Nora broke into a short angry laugh. "You were always a model of diplomacy, Miles," she said. Her tone was contemptuous, but her brother chose to take her words literally, and the other two were too absorbed to notice her.

"And that," said the squire furiously, "is the people we have kow-towed to—a lot of swaggering braggarts who don't know what to do with themselves for conceit. This comes of all

our rubbishy peace-loving notions! The world only gives us credit for being afraid!"

He went on explosively tirading, but Nora no longer listened. She was thinking of her mother's words and wondering if these then were the narrow-hearted fools and braggarts against whom she was to struggle. And in that moment the struggle began in her own heart. She went to the window and tried to shut her ears against all that was going on about her. She tried to understand herself and the strange, conflicting emotions which had come to life in the last few minutes. Everything that the squire and her brother had said goaded her to a hot retort. She felt herself quivering with indignation—because they were abusing a people she hated, the man whom she had deserted because she no longer loved him! She *wanted* to ratify every word they said; she told herself that she had the right to do so, that it was all true; and yet her whole spirit rose in arms against their attack. What was worse, she felt a vague antipathy for these three men. She thought the squire coarse and arrogant; his entry and his greeting to her had been rough and without the respect to which she was accustomed. And why could Miles do nothing without his hands in his pockets? Why, when he sat down, had he to be either nursing his leg or "slouching"? Why was her father so weak and fussy-looking? And then, to her horror, Wolff stood before her eyes. Was it a feeling of pride which crept over her, pride in his upright bearing and dignity? *He* had never been rough or rude to her. His courtesy to her and all women had been unvarying. She turned quickly away, trying to stop her own thoughts. The squire was standing in his favourite attitude, with his legs wide apart, still tirading impartially against the German people and the English Government, who refused to wipe them off the face of the earth. Miles had collapsed into the most comfortable arm-chair, his head thrown back, his hands plunged deep in his pockets. The Rev. John stood between them, a picture of helpless dejection. It seemed to Nora that they had each taken up the attitude in which she hated them most. Hated! It was the word her thoughts had uttered. It could not be recalled. If she hated them—why, then, she had lost everything: her husband, her people, her own nationality! Why, then, she was nothing, she belonged to no one, no link of love bound her to any living being. Only her mother was left—her mother and that one other being the knowledge of whose existence had come too late to save her.

In the same moment that her full misery broke upon Nora some one tapped at the door and, without awaiting an answer, a pale, terrified-looking servant rushed in.

"If you please, sir," she stammered, "will you come at once? The mistress is—asleep—and we cannot wake her——"

The Rev. John uttered a smothered cry, and without a word to his guest hurried from the room. Miles followed him. But Nora remained quietly by the window and took no notice of the squire as, with an awkwardly expressed hope that "it would be all right," he left her to herself.

She knew what had happened. Her mother had bidden her good night, and night had come. She was alone—in the whole world alone and friendless.

## CHAPTER II
### EXILED

There is only one sorrow in life which is really great, and that is the loss of those we love. The other sorrows seem great so long as we have been spared the hardest blow which life can deal us, and then we understand that, after all, they were very petty and that if we had chosen we could have borne them patiently, even cheerfully. Loss of health, loss of wealth, loss of position—they are all bad in their way, and as a rule we make the worst we can of them; but not till we have to bear them *alone*, without the support of some familiar, loving hand, have we the right to cry out that we can endure no more.

And for the first time in her life Nora knew loneliness—not the loneliness which she had felt in her husband's home and amongst her husband's people, for that had been temporary, a state which could, if necessary, be overcome by a return to those whom she had left of her own free-will and whose love and sympathy she could still claim. *This* loneliness was final, unbridgeable. Death had raised up a wall between her and all return. The one being whose hand could have comforted her, in whose arms she could have found peace and rest, had passed beyond recall, and it was in vain that, in a childish agony of grief, she flung herself down by her mother's sofa and pleaded with the dead not to leave her comfortless. There was no answer. The patient, noble woman who had lain there day after day without complaint, watching the slow, painful fulfilment of her destiny, had gone and would come no more. She had gained her freedom. Even in her own

stormy sorrow Nora realised so much—that her mother was free and that her life had been a long, bitter imprisonment, to which it would have been cruel to recall her. She had gone willingly, passing out of a sphere in which she had always been an exile, and taking with her the last—perhaps the only link which had ever bound Nora to her home. In those hours when Nora had hated the stuffy little flat and had longed for the scent of the home flowers, it had always been of her mother's garden which she had thought; when she had seen the picture of the Vicarage rise before her eyes it had always been her mother's room which had stood out clearest, which had tempted her by the tenderest recollections. And now that her mother had gone, that home had ceased to be her home. The flowers were dead in the garden, the rooms empty of the old haunting charm, the glamour which her exile's memory had cast about her old life became dull and faded. She saw now an ugly red-brick building, with dreary, silent rooms, and people with whom she had never been in sympathy save in her imagination. This last was the bitterest disappointment of all. In her anger against Wolff she had expected and believed so much of these "home people," and they had, after all, failed her.

As she sat alone in the sad, empty room, she felt that those five days in England had taken from her not only the dearest hope but the last illusion. Her mother had said, "You do not belong here," and it was true. She was an exile in this narrow little world, and between her father and herself there was an insurmountable barrier of taste and thought. It had always been there, just as, like her mother, she had always been an exile, but in her girlhood's days it had been less pronounced, less clearly defined. Now that she had had experience in another world, she could no longer bear the trammels of her father's conventional prejudices. She had hated and despised her mode of life at Wolff's side; she began to see, though dimly, that it had had at least its great moments, that it was at least inspired by a great idea worthy of the sacrifices it demanded. Here there was no sacrifice and no idea—only vegetation, and her companion was not even a useful machine. He was a weak muddler, and his world was a little village which muddled along in a muddle-loving country and believed great things of itself and its institutions. Just as Nora had found the squire ridiculous with his two-week soldiers, so her father irritated her with his mingled piety, pusillanimity, and timid self-satisfaction. Not even their common grief had brought them together. They had stood wordless by their dead, and when the Rev. John had seemed about to speak, she had fled from him, dreading that his words might destroy the impression which the serene sleeper had made upon her mind. Since then they had hardly spoken, and Miles had wandered between them like a sullen, dissatisfied ghost. Somehow, he felt that his influence over Nora was at an end, that from the moment her feet had touched her native soil she had turned from him and his explanations with something like repugnance. He did not trouble to seek the reason—indeed, she could have given him none; but the shadow between them threw Nora back into even deeper loneliness.

And the wonder which had come into her life—the miracle which had been revealed to her in her mother's eyes? She only knew that its revelation had come too late. Though all that was best and noblest in her stirred as if beneath some divine touch, she felt none of the exultation, none of the sanctified happiness which might have been hers. The gift which was to come to her was like a golden link in a broken chain, like a jewel without setting—beautiful but imperfect. She was indeed an exile and bore the exile's curse.

Thus, when the first tempest of grief had passed she faced the future with the first fear turned to conviction. She had lost everything, even to her nationality. Those few months had been sufficient to imbue her, without her knowledge, with ideas and principles which made her a stranger in her own land. She could no longer admire without reservation; at every turn she was forced to compare and criticise with the same sharpness as she had compared and criticised in her German home, and a word against the people to whom she still theoretically belonged was sufficient to arouse the same indignation and resentment. Poor Nora! It was a bitter self-revelation which she had to face, and the only being who could have helped her in this conflict between the dual affections had been laid only a few hours before in the dreary churchyard whose walls she could distinguish through the leafless trees. The sight of those walls and the red spire of the church awakened her grief to its first intensity. She sprang up from her place by the empty sofa and hurried out of the room and out of the house. On her way she passed her father's room. The door stood open, and she saw him seated by the table, with his face buried in his hands. She knew that he was crying, but she shrank swiftly away, with the horrible conviction that she despised him. She wondered if Wolff had cried when he had returned and found that she had left him. She felt sure that he had gone on working, and the picture which rose before her fancy of a strong, broad-shouldered man bent over his maps and plans in unswervable devotion

caused her a strange sensation of relief.

It was already late afternoon as she left the village behind her. She had no definite goal save the one to be alone, and beyond the range of prying, curious eyes, and almost unconsciously she chose the path over the fields where, months before, she had gone to meet Robert Arnold. Then it had been late summer, and it was now winter, but so vividly did the scene recur to her that when a tall, well-known figure strode out of the mists towards her, she could have believed that all the preceding months, with their condensed history of bewildering change, had been no more than an hallucination and that she was once more Nora Ingestre, setting out to learn the mysteries of her own heart. But the next instant her hand was taken, and she was looking into a familiar face which was yet so altered that she would have known alone from its lines of care and grief that time had moved on, bringing with him his inevitable burden.

"Robert!" she cried. She saw his look of pain, and wondered at it. She did not know that he, too, had drawn the same comparison between then and now, and had been shocked by the change in the face which so short a time ago had been that of a girl—nay, almost of a child.

"Poor little Nora!" he said under his breath. "Poor little Nora!"

She lifted her hand as though to stop all words of commiseration, and he turned quietly and walked at her side. He understood that he was helpless, that he could do nothing to comfort her in her grief, and yet he felt, too, that she was glad of his presence and silent sympathy.

All at once she herself broke the silence, and her voice, save that it was intensely weary, sounded untroubled and calm.

"I did not know you were here," she said. "I thought you were with your regiment."

"I have my Christmas leave," he answered. "They have no special need of me."

There was a bitterness in his tone and words which she understood. She looked at him, and saw that he was frowning as though at some painful reflection.

"There will be no fighting?" she asked.

"No, none. We have given in. I suppose"—he controlled his voice with an effort—"I suppose we had to."

"Had to?" she echoed.

"We were not ready," he said between his teeth. "Nothing was ready. I could never have believed it was possible had I not seen it with my own eyes. If there had been a war, it would have been a repetition of 1870, with London for a Sedan, and they knew it. No horses, reduced regiments, a crowd of half-trained men pitted against a nation which has been ready for war any day in the last years! The thing was obvious."

"You were so sure," she said dully. "Everybody was so sure."

"No one knew until the test came," he answered. "The outside of things was well enough, and there were plenty of able statesmen and generals to tell us that we had never been better prepared. We like listening to that sort of talk, and we like believing it. A belief like that is so comforting. It frees us from all sacrifice—all duty. 'When the call comes, we shall answer to it,' is our patriotic motto. 'An Englishman is worth three foreigners.' And then, when the call comes, a handful of half-trained youths who cannot stand a day's march, who can scarcely ride, scarcely shoot, is all that we have to show for our boasting." He clenched his fist with a movement of angry despair. "It's all wrong, Nora, all wrong! We have grown too easy-going, too fond of our smooth comfort. Even if we knew that our national existence were threatened, we should not rouse ourselves. We should vote for a few more Dreadnoughts and make a great outcry and bang the Party drum with talk. We think, because we have the money, that things can't go far wrong—we have won before, so we think there is a kind of lucky star to save us, however little we have deserved success. We can't see that the world has changed, that we have to face a race that has all our virtues in their youth and strength—all our tenacity, all our bulldog purpose, all our old stoicism; and we—God knows! We never forget our grand heritage; we never forget our forefathers nor the glory they won for us. But we forget to honour them with our own worthiness. How will it all end?"

"Whether it be in peace or in war, surely only the fittest can win," she said thoughtfully. "It will not be the richest, or the best-armed nation, but the best, the worthiest. Pray God we may prove ourselves to be that nation!"

"Pray God!" he echoed thoughtfully.

For a minute they walked on in the gathering mist without speaking. Both were plunged in sad reflection, but in Nora's heart there had dawned a new relief, a new peace. Arnold had spoken without arrogance, with a proud humility, with a respect and admiration for those whom he had hitherto despised. She did not know what had brought about the change, but it comforted

her, it brought her nearer to him; in some strange way it revived all her old love for England and her people. The squire's swaggering, her brother's calumnies had maddened her. She discovered dignity and candour in Arnold's words, and her aching heart filled with gratitude.

Suddenly he stopped short and faced her. She saw then that a new thought had arisen in his mind.

"Nora, have you heard from your husband?" he demanded.

She shook her head and went on walking, quickly, almost nervously.

"No."

"Are you going to return to him—soon?"

"You know it is impossible that I should ever return," she answered. "In his eyes, at least, I have no excuse for what I did—none. He would never forgive me."

"Not if he loved you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Even if he did—even if he forgave me, I could not return. I left him because I had ceased to love him, because the distance that separated us was too great. I did not understand his way of life, nor he mine. He said things I shall never forgive."

"Not even if you loved him?"

"I do not love him!" she returned passionately. "He forfeited my love. He did not care enough to fight for it. How should I grow to love him again?"

Arnold drove his stick into the soft turf. His face was white and deeply troubled.

"I feel as though I had done you a great wrong, Nora," he said. "I did you a wrong already in the beginning when I tried to force my love upon your inexperience—when I tried to bind you to me without having really won you. I failed, and I was justly punished. But I wronged you still more when I sought you out and offered you my friendship. I deceived you and I deceived myself. It was not friendship, and people were right to give it another name and to look askance at my part in your life. Nora, it is my one excuse that I did not know. I believed absolutely in my own loyalty, until that night of the ball. Then for the first time I knew that I was dangerous, and whether I had been recalled or not, I should have gone away. But Fate was too strong for me. If I had really been your friend, I should not have taken you with me that night. It was a mad thing to have done. But everything happened so quickly that I lost my self-control, my reason. Now I feel as though I had put an insurmountable barrier between you and your husband and had ruined your happiness—perhaps your life."

She had listened to him in unbroken silence, her brows puckered into painful, ominous lines.

"You say you are not my friend?" she said. "What are you, then?"

"One who loves you," he answered, "and one who has never really ceased to long for you as his own."

"And you talked of friendship!" she cried.

"God forgive me. Nora, a man does not know his own heart until the moment comes when he is put to the test as I was. I believed it possible that I could care for you in that way. I should have known better."

"I also should have known better," she said.

"No; you were so young. You could not have known what a man is capable and incapable of performing. The blame is all mine. And if I have helped to bring sorrow into your life, my punishment will be more than I can bear."

So much genuine grief and remorse revealed itself in his shaken voice that she laid her hand pityingly on his arm.

"Don't talk as though it were alone your fault," she said. "It was mine as well. If I could not have judged your heart, I could have judged my own."

"Nora!" he exclaimed, horror-stricken.

"I did not love you," she went on, almost to herself, "and I do not love you. I do not believe that I love any one on earth; but I always knew that I might grow to love you. And—perhaps I have something of my father in me—I should not have run so great a risk."

"Nora!" he repeated, and beneath the horror there rang a painful joy.

She stopped and looked him sternly in the face.

"Do not misunderstand me, Robert. I did not love you. Then I loved my husband, and I do not believe you really came between us. There were other things, and you were only the instrument that helped me to escape from a life that was driving me mad. But, because of all that had been between us and that which might so easily have been, I ought never to have allowed you a place in my life. It was wrong, and the punishment is just this—that now our friendship is an

impossibility."

He walked on as though he could not bear to listen to her.

"I know, I know!" he said, impatient with pain. "I know it is true. I feel no friendship for you—only an immense love which has not learnt to be selfless. But it will come; it shall come. I swear it. And when it comes—will you never be able to trust me?"

"I don't know," she said listlessly.

"Do not punish me because I have been honest and confessed what I might have kept hidden."

"I should have known sooner or later," she answered.

They had taken the village path, and already the spire of the church rising above the clustering houses warned them that their moments together were numbered. As though by mutual consent, they stopped and stood silent, avoiding each other's eyes.

"I want you to know one thing," he said at last. "Whatever happens, I shall love you all my life, and that if you need me I shall prove worthy of your trust. Promise me you will turn to me as you would to a friend. Don't take that hope from me!"

"How can I take hope from any one?" she answered; "I who have no hope——"

She broke off, and he took her hand and forced her to look at him.

"Oh, Nora!" he cried despairingly. "You are so young, and you speak as though your heart were broken!"

"I do not know whether it is broken-hearted to feel nothing," she said. "If so, then I am broken-hearted."

"Nora, I believe you love your husband in spite of all you say. You must go back to him. Where there is love there must be forgiveness. You will forgive each other. You will put aside misunderstandings and foolish prejudices, and start afresh."

He spoke with a painful enthusiasm like that of a man who is willing to trample on his own happiness; but Nora shook her head.

"No one understands how impossible it is," she said. "If there were nothing else to separate us, there would be the bitterness and hatred between our countries. It sounds terrible—absurd; but that is the truth. It was that hatred which poisoned our life together, and if I could go back it would poison our whole future. Oh——" she made a little passionate gesture of protest. "Why are we so mean and petty? Why cannot we watch the rise of another nation without hatred and jealousy? Why cannot we be generous and watch with sympathy and hope her progress along the path which we have trodden? Why cannot we go forward shoulder to shoulder with her, learning and teaching, fearing no one? If we are worthy of our great place in the world, we shall keep it, no matter how strong others may grow; if we are unworthy, nothing will save us, from downfall—not all our ships and wealth. It seems so obvious, and yet——" Her momentary outburst died down to the old listlessness. "I talk like that because I have suffered it so in my life," she said; "but it is all talk. At the bottom, the antagonism is still there. Nothing will ever bridge it over." She held out her hand with a wan smile. "Good-bye, Robert."

"Good-bye; and God bless you, dear!"

He watched her move slowly homewards. He suffered intensely because he knew that her pain was greater than his. He knew that the antagonism she had spoken of surrounded her whole life, and that she stood alone, without husband, without people, and without country.

## CHAPTER III
### REVELATION

Miles Ingestre met his sister in the hall, and without a word drew her into the sitting-room and closed the door. His action had been so sudden, his grip upon her arm so fierce, that she stood looking at him, too startled to protest. In the half-darkness she could only see that he was very pale and that he vainly strove to control the nervous twitching of his lips.

"What is it?" she asked. "Has anything happened?"

"Some one has come," he said breathlessly.

She did not answer. A black veil had fallen before her eyes, and an emotion to which she could give no name, but which was so powerful that she stretched out a groping hand for support, clutched at her throat and stifled her. She did not ask who had come. She knew by the very change in herself, by the violent shock which seemed to waken her stunned senses to a

renewed and terrible capacity for suffering.

"Wolff—my husband!" she stammered. "Where is he?"

"It is not Wolff," Miles retorted rapidly. "It is that Hildegarde von Arnim. She arrived half an hour ago, and says she must see you at once. She won't speak to either of us."

"Hildegarde? You must be dreaming! She is too ill to move."

"She looks ill, but she can move all right. At any rate, she seems to have come a long way to find you."

"I must go to her," Nora said dully. "Where is she? Why don't you let me pass?"

"Look here, Nora." He took her hand again, and his tone became half cajoling, half threatening. "I can guess what she has come about. She wants to get you back and put you against me—against us all. She will tell you all sorts of lies. But you won't believe her, and you'll stick to us this time? Swear, Nora!"

She tried to shake herself free.

"Why should I swear? You know I shan't go back—I couldn't; and she would be the last person to want it. She has come about something else; perhaps about the——" She stopped with a quick breath of pain. "Let me go, Miles!

"All right. But you'll stand by me, Nora? And you won't believe her lies?"

"I don't know what you mean. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing; only I know they'll do anything to—to put us in the wrong. They hate us like the devil. I—I wanted to warn you, that's all."

Nora did not understand him. His manner, over-excited as it was, frightened her even more than this strangest of all strange visits. What miracle had brought the feeble invalid over the sea to seek her—what miracle or what catastrophe? And as she entered the drawing-room and saw the beautiful, exhausted face and stern, unsmiling eyes which had once been all love and tenderness for her, the fear grew to something definite, so that she stopped short, hesitating, overwhelmed by that and by a sudden shame.

But of shame Hildegarde Arnim saw no sign. She saw defiance in that waiting attitude, and not even the pathos of the black dress and pale, sad face could touch her. She rose, but gave no sign of greeting.

"My mother sent me to you," she said. "I am to tell you that your—that Wolff is dying."

She seemed to take a cruel delight in the change which came over the other's face.

"Dying," she repeated deliberately. "Dying."

Nora clasped her hands in an agonised movement of appeal.

"I know—I have heard you. For pity's sake, tell me——"

"You need not be afraid. I shall tell you everything, to the last detail." Hildegarde seated herself again. Her clenched hand rested on the table and her eyes fixed themselves on her companion with a detestation almost violent in its intensity. "It is over a year since you became engaged to my cousin," she went on. "It is not nine months since you became his wife. It is not a long time, but it was long enough for you to ruin the best, the noblest man whom I at least have ever met. You see, I declare openly what you no doubt know and have triumphed over. I love Wolff, and I have loved him all my life. If he had made me his wife, I should have deemed myself unworthy of so much happiness, and it would have been a joy to sacrifice myself for him. No doubt you find such an idea poor and contemptible; the idea of sacrifice for those one loves is perhaps out of fashion in your country. But, be that as it may, it was an idea which served you well at the time. Because I loved him, and because his happiness was really dearer to me than anything else on earth, I gave him up to you——"

"You gave him up to *me*!" Nora echoed blankly.

"On the same day that he asked you to be his wife I had given him his freedom from a bond which, though it had never been openly acknowledged, was still binding on him. You did not know that?"

Nora sank down in the chair by which she had been standing. Her strength had left her; she looked broken, and there was something intensely piteous in the clasped hands upon her lap.

"How should I have known?" she asked almost inaudibly.

"You might have known," Hildegarde retorted. "You knew Wolff. He was a man of honour. He would never have yielded even to his love for you until he knew himself absolutely free."

There was a cutting significance in her tone which could not be mistaken. Nora lifted her head and met the scornful eyes with despairing resolution.

"You say that against me, because I was not free," she said. "But you do not know everything; you have no right to judge. My heart was free—my heart belonged to Wolff and Wolff only."

"You were bound to another man."

"By a foolish letter written in a moment of despair. You have said that I despise all sacrifice. But that letter was my sacrifice to you, Hildegarde."

"You must be mad," was the contemptuous answer.

"You have not spared me," Nora went on recklessly. "I shall not spare you. That night when you were delirious I learnt of your whole love for Wolff and all that you suffered. I also loved him—I also suffered, and I distrusted my own strength. I tried to raise a barrier between myself and him, so—so that we could never come together. I thought if I could say to him 'I belong to another,' that I should save you from heart-break and myself from a mean, ungrateful act. But the barrier was not high enough or strong enough to shield me from my own weakness. Believe me or not, as you will—that is the truth. In all my life I have loved only one man—my husband."

There was a moment's silence. Hildegarde sat stiff and upright, her lips firmly compressed, her expression unchanged. But her voice betrayed the rising of a new emotion.

"I must believe what you have told me," she said. "In that case, what you did was pardonable—even generous. But that is not all. That was not what made me hate you. I hate you because you have ruined Wolff's life. For the first month or two you made him happy because you were happy yourself. Then I suppose you tired of it all—of the poverty and the restrictions and the sacrifices. It did not satisfy your grand English tastes to go poorly dressed and live in small, ill-furnished flats. It was beneath your dignity to see to your husband's dinner; it did not suit you to sit at home alone and wait for him, much less to make his friends your friends and join in their life. Though they were honourable, good people, who brought their sacrifices uncomplainingly, they were beneath you. You despised them because they could not afford to live as you considered necessary, because they cooked their husbands' supper and wore old clothes so that he might go into the world and represent his name and his profession worthily. You hated them——"

"Not till they hated me!" Nora broke in, with a movement of passionate protest.

"They did not hate you—I know that. They welcomed you as a sister and a comrade, until you showed that you would have none of them—until they saw that you despised their ways and their ideals. Yes; they have ideals, those poor dowdy women whom you looked down upon, and their first and highest ideal is their Duty. Mark this! They bore with you and your contempt and English arrogance until you insulted that ideal. They bore with you as a comrade until you proved yourself unworthy of their comradeship, until you brought disgrace upon your husband's name and profession with your profligate brother and your lover——"

"Hildegarde—how dare you!"

"I dare because it is the truth."

Both women had risen and faced each other. And yet in that supreme moment of bitterness, something between them—their hatred and distrust—yielded. Accuser and accused read in each other's eyes a misery too great for hatred.

"I know everything," Hildegarde went on rapidly. "Wolff has not opened his lips, but Seleneck told us. We know that Wolff took upon his shoulders the consequences of your and your brother's conduct. He accepted the challenge that your brother refused, and he went to his death without a word of reproach or anger. And that same night you fled with the man whose name the whole world coupled with yours, and took with you the one thing of value which you could steal from your husband—his soldier's honour."

Nora put her hand to her forehead.

"Please—please tell me what you mean!" she cried piteously. "I don't understand—his soldier's honour——?"

"You know nothing of the papers that were stolen on the same night of your flight?"

"Papers——?"

"Mobilisation papers—the papers on which Wolff had been working. When Seleneck came to see you and tell you what had happened, he found that you had gone, and that Wolff's room had been broken into. There was only one explanation."

"Listen!" Nora leant against the table. She was breathing in broken gasps that were like sobs, but there was such clear resolution in her eyes that Hildegarde waited in stern, rigid patience for her to speak. "I will tell you all I can," she said at last, in a low, toneless voice from which she had driven every trace of emotion. "I can't tell you all, because I have not the strength—you must just believe me, Hildegarde, when I say that I loved Wolff and that I was true to him—yes, right to the bitter end. You must try and understand that I suffered. I was English. I couldn't help myself. I was English to the bottom of my heart. I loved my country as you love yours, and I could not give it up. When the trouble began I was miserable: everything goaded me. Oh, I was all wrong, I

know. I let myself be carried away by it all. I let myself be influenced. There were the Bauers—you won't understand that, perhaps, but they flattered me. They offered me friendship where others only followed me with their criticism; and when I saw where it would all lead it was too late. Miles had fallen into their hands. There were terrible debts and money troubles, and I dared not tell Wolff. I knew he would send Miles away and—and I was afraid of the loneliness."

"Of the loneliness!" Hildegarde echoed scornfully.

"Oh, can't you understand? I was a stranger among you. I was young and headstrong and had made so many enemies. I had no one to turn to—only Miles and Captain Arnold. They were English; they understood a little what I felt. And I suffered, Hildegarde. It was as though I had been infected with some frightful fever which left me no calm, which magnified every word and look into a taunt and an insult. Once I *did* fight against it because I *did* love Wolff and because I knew that our whole happiness was at stake. But in the end it was too much for me. That night when we all thought war had been declared, I could bear it no longer. I rushed home. My brother had already gone——" She stopped a moment as though some terrible new thought had flashed through her brain, and the last trace of colour fled from her cheeks. "I followed him. At the station I could not find him, but Captain Arnold was there. He took me with him—home to my people. I did not go to him intentionally: I could not have done so, because I did not love him and never had loved him. I went home. That is all."

"And the papers?"

They looked each other in the eyes.

"I think I know. God pity me—*that* disgrace is indeed mine!"

"No, no, not yours! Nora——." The old tone of tenderness had crept into the shaken voice. She said no more, and they stood silently side by side, overwhelmed with the disgrace that was another's, but which yet seemed to surround them with its ugly shadow.

It was Nora who at last broke the silence.

"He must have been mad!" she said, as though she were thinking aloud. "He must have thought that he was serving his country."

But Hildegarde stopped her with a scornful gesture.

"He hated Wolff," she said, "and for the good reason that Wolff had helped and befriended him for your sake. He paid his debts with money which my mother had given him——"

"Don't, Hildegarde! Don't tell me any more—not now. I cannot bear it!"

The agony in her voice silenced the reproach. Hildegarde Arnim turned away, as though she, too, had reached the limit of her strength.

"I am not here to hurt you, but to save Wolff," she said brokenly. "He will not save himself. Ever since he knew what had happened he has lain with his eyes closed and will say nothing. Only when Captain von Seleneck asked him about the papers, he said that he was to be held responsible. They will arrest him if they are not brought back in time."

"Oh, no, no!"

Hildegarde laughed harshly.

"It will be only a formality," she said. "They know that he is dying, and perhaps they will believe that he is innocent. But he has taken the responsibility upon himself and must bear the punishment. It was Captain von Seleneck who told me to go to you. He has taken Wolff to his house, where my mother and his wife are nursing him. Seleneck thought you might have pity, and the papers are valueless now that there is to be no war. Oh, I know that Wolff is suffering! He was so proud of his work and his duty and his great trust. You cannot understand all that it means to him. Oh, Nora, let him die in peace! Give him back his good name—he treasured it so ——"

All the hatred and cruelty had gone. She held out her hands to Nora in desperate, almost humble, pleading.

Nora stood rigid, staring in front of her with blank, terrible eyes.

"He is dying!" she said under her breath. "He thinks I was so cruel and wicked! Oh, Wolff!"

"When he is asleep he calls your name," Hildegarde went on, "and once he was half delirious, and he told me that you were not to worry—that he was going to die—he wanted to die. And it is true: he wants to die. He has lost everything—everything. That is why I have come—to bring him back at least his honour. Oh, Nora, help me! Remember how he loved you!" She drew a letter from her pocket and forced it into Nora's powerless hands. "He wrote that before it all happened: it was his farewell to you. He is dying. Read it! Surely it will tell you how he loved you! Surely it will make you pitiful! Nora, if I have been unjust and cruel—forgive me. Think that I am mad with grief—I loved him so——"

She broke off. Nora was reading her husband's letter, and a silence as of death seemed to hover in the little room.

"MY BELOVED WIFE," Wolff had written. "It seems strange and foolish that I should sit down and write to you when you are in the next room and I could go in to you and tell you all that I have in my heart. It seems all the more foolish because this letter may never come into your hands. Somehow, though, I think that it will, and that, though I am a clumsy fellow with my pen, you will understand better than if I spoke to you now. Now there is a terrible sea between us which neither of us can cross. You are bitter and angry with me because I am a soldier and must do my duty even if it is against the one I love most on earth. I am sad because I have lost my wife. You see, my dearest, I know everything. I have known quite a long time, and pitied you with all my heart. I pitied because I understood. You were too young to know your own heart or to measure the sacrifices which you would have to bring, and it was my fault that I did not measure for you and make you understand. Well, after it was too late, you found out for yourself, and the old love came back into your life, and I lost you. I never asked you about that 'old love.' I trusted you, and I believed that the day would come when you would tell me everything. Fate has ordained otherwise. I shall never understand anything, save that you *did* love me, and that for a time we were wonderfully happy in our love. Now that it is all over, I can still thank you for that time. It was worth all that it has cost, and perhaps you too will not regret it—now that it is over. My beloved wife! I suppose it had to end thus: there was too much between us. I suppose—old *Streber* that I am, with my cut-and-dried ways—that I could not fit into your life nor fill it as another might have done, and you could not understand that it was not want of love that made me fail. You could not understand that I could love you and yet ask you to sacrifice so much. If you had been a German woman you would have understood better. You would have seen that a soldier must belong to his duty, and that his wife must help him at whatever cost. But you were English, and there was no reason why you should have brought sacrifices to a country that was not your own. I can understand that: I always understood, but I could not help you.

"There was only one way for me to go, and you had to choose whether you would follow me or go back. I wonder how you would have chosen? Thank God, you need not be put to the test. I could not have borne to see you suffer. When you receive this you will know that you are free and can go back to your own people and your own country. It is that freedom from which I hope more than I would dare to hope if I went to you now. You will be able to forgive me because it is easy to forgive those who have passed out of one's life for ever. You see, I know that I need forgiveness. In my selfishness I tempted you into a life too full of sacrifice and hardship, and I failed you, my darling, sometimes because I was too miserable to see clearly, sometimes because I did not understand, but never because I did not love you. Forgive me, then, and perhaps—if you can—let a little of the old love revive. It can do no harm, and it makes me happy to think that it is possible.

"Do not try to find out how this has all happened. All you need know is that I am to fight a duel to-morrow, and that the chances are against me. I know you despise duelling, but this time it has at least its use—it will set you free.

"This is a poor letter, dearest, in which I have said only half of all I long to say. If you read in it one word of reproach or regret, believe that it is only my clumsy pen which has failed me, and that I have nothing in my heart but love for you. In all I am to blame, and I am glad that it has been spared me to see you suffer. Do not be sad over all that has happened; do not let it cast a shadow over your life. You have given a few months' happiness to a man who has never for one instant counted the price too high. You made me very happy. Let that be my thanks to you.

"God bless you, my little English wife! In my mind's eye I can see you sitting at your table in the next room, with your heart full of bitterness against me; or perhaps you are thinking of—— No, I will not believe that. I would rather believe that it is only bitterness, only sorrow because you are torn between your country and your husband, and can find no peace. The peace is yours now; and when the time comes for you to find your happiness in that old love, remember that I understood and that I blessed you.

"WOLFF VON ARNIM.

"P.S.—The Selenecks are your friends, and have promised to help you. Trust them implicitly."

Nora lifted her eyes to Hildegarde's. The two women who a short half-hour before had confronted each other in hatred and defiance now met on the common ground of a great sorrow. The

barriers between them were yielding fast, were being swept aside. Their hands met, and that touch broke down the last restraint. The next instant they were clasped in each other's arms.

"I loved him so!" Nora sobbed wildly. "I loved him so—and I have made him unhappy. I have killed him! Oh, Hildegarde, why did I come into his life? You would have made him happy. You loved him, and there was nothing to divide you. Why did you not keep him? Why did you give him back his freedom?"

"I could not have made him happy, Nora," Hildegarde answered. "I think there are some natures which must come together though the world stands between, and even if it be to their own ruin. Wolff belongs to you. He will belong to you to the very end."

Nora lifted her face. She had become suddenly calm. She held herself with the dignity of resolution.

"And I to him," she said. "I belong to him and to no one else in the world. And whatever separates us, I shall find my way back. There must be—there is a bridge across. And when I have crossed it I shall atone as no woman ever atoned before. I shall blot out the past. Take me with you, Hildegarde; take me back to him—now, this hour!"

Hildegarde kissed her. She could have said that there is a "too late" in life, and that that "too late" had come. But there was something in Nora's face—a hope, a confidence, a strange look of clarified happiness which held her silent. Without a word, Nora turned and left her. She seemed guided by a sure instinct, for she went straight to her brother's bedroom. As she entered he was hurriedly cramming some clothes into a portmanteau, and his white, foolish face was blank with fear.

"Well?" he asked.

She came towards him, and he knew that no explanation was needed.

"Give me the papers you stole from my husband!" she said quietly. "Give them to me at once."

A sullen, defiant answer trembled on his lips, but she stopped him with a single gesture.

"I do not ask you to explain or excuse yourself," she said. "I know what you are, Miles, and I should not believe you. Nor do I appeal to your better feelings. I appeal to your common sense. The papers are useless to you. They might only bring you into trouble. Give them to me!"

He gave them to her without a word of protest. Her paralysed him; and only when she had reached the door he stammered a single question.

"Where are you going, Nora?"

"I am going home—to my husband," she answered, "and I pray with all my heart that I may never see your face again!"

## CHAPTER IV
### THE BRIDGE ACROSS

The Selenecks' little drawing-room was almost in darkness. Only the pale, flickering reflection from the lights in the street beneath fell on the farther wall and threw into ghostly prominence the figures of the silent occupants. Frau von Seleneck was seated at the table, still bent over a letter which she had ceased to write long before the dusk had crept in upon them. Her husband knelt beside her, and his hand held hers in a strong, tender clasp.

Thus they had been ever since a hard-drawn sob had told him that the letter was no more than a pretence. He had seen the tear-stains and the piteous smudges, and he had knelt down as though he knew that his closer presence comforted her. Neither had spoken. They seemed to be always listening, but the silence remained unbroken. Once, it is true, a carriage had rattled along the street and they had looked at each other, but it had gone on, and neither had made any observation.

From where they sat they could see across the road into the rooms of the house opposite. They were brightly lit, and in one a noble young fir-tree glittered in all the glory of tinsel and golden spangles. Husband and wife glanced quickly away. It was Christmas Eve. A tiny little shrub stood in the corner, unadorned save with the candles and one single star. Frau von Seleneck had bought it at the last moment, because she could not bring herself to let the great evening pass without that time-honoured custom, but she had cried when she had fixed the star on the topmost branch, and since then she had never dared look at it because of the tears that rose in spite of every heroic effort.

Presently the clock upon the mantelpiece began to chime. They counted the hurried, cheery

little strokes under their breath. Seven o'clock.

"They must be here soon," she said in a whisper.

"If the train is not late," he answered, trying to speak in a matter-of-fact tone. "They are usually late on Christmas Eve."

"Yes," she said. "How terrible and long the journey must seem to her!"

"If she cares!" he said bitterly.

His wife's hand tightened on his.

"I think she cares," she said with an almost awe-struck earnestness. "I am nearly sure. It is not alone that she is coming—it is something else. Kurt, haven't you ever had a letter—just an ordinary letter—from some one dear to you, and haven't you had the feeling that it contained a message of which the writer had written nothing—as though the words had absorbed the look of his eyes, the touch of his hand, and were trying to transmit to you all that which he had tried to hide behind them? That was how I felt when Nora's telegram came. It was just an ordinary, ugly telegram, and yet I knew that she cared—that she was sorry."

"Pray God he may live to see her!" he answered.

"Pray God that he may live to be happy with her!" she added reverently.

He shook his head.

"I don't pray that," he said. "I can't ask impossibilities of God. And how should Nora make Wolff happy now? She failed before, when her task was easy. What should give her the strength to succeed in the face of the distrust and hatred which she called to life by her own folly?"

"I shall help her," Elsa von Seleneck returned proudly. "I shall stand by her for Wolff's sake and because we were once friends. After all, she has atoned—she is coming back. That must be the hardest thing of all."

"She will need more than your help," was the grave answer.

"Then God will give it her!"

A tear splashed on to the note-paper, and he pressed her hand tighter.

"Steady, Frauchen!" he whispered. "I hear some one moving."

They listened breathlessly. A second cab rumbled along the street, but this time they did not hear it. Their whole attention was concentrated on that neighbouring room, where life and death kept their silent vigil, and when suddenly the door was softly opened, both started as though an icy hand had touched them on the shoulder.

A faint light came through the open doorway, and against the pale background Frau von Arnim's figure stood out in all its old noble stateliness. They could not see her face, but they felt that it was composed and resolute in its grief.

"I think they have come," she said. "I heard a cab outside."

Somewhere downstairs a bell rang, and Seleneck rose softly to his feet.

"I will light the lamp," he said, but his hand shook, and his wife took the matches from him.

"Let me do it, Kurt. I am crying—I can't help it; but I am quite steady. *Gnädige Frau*, how is he?"

"Sleeping," was the answer.

Poor Frau von Seleneck was not as good as her word. She could not manage the wick, and the glass shade threatened to fall from her nervous hands. In the end she lighted the little candles on the Christmas tree.

"We can at least see each other," she apologised humbly.

Thus it was by this frail yet steady light of hope and happiness that Nora entered and stood before them. She was not alone, and yet, as though of intention, Hildegarde had drawn back from her so that she stood apart, looking silently from one to the other. No one spoke. They too looked at her without a gesture of greeting, even of recognition. It was as though she were a total stranger, an intruder, an enemy. And yet that haggard young face might have touched them. It was almost terrible in its look of suspense and agony.

"Have I come in time?" she whispered.

Her voice broke the spell. Frau von Arnim nodded. Nothing had changed in her expression, but its very calm was a reproach and a punishment.

"He is alive," she said.

Nora took a step forward so that she came within the pale circle of light. For the first time they saw each other full in the eyes.

"You have brought the papers—the proof that he is innocent?" Frau von Arnim asked.

"I have brought everything—more than you know; and I have come to be forgiven."

A dead, blank silence. Suddenly she stretched out her hands in piteous, reckless appeal.

"Forgive me. I am guilty, but not so guilty as you think. I have been foolish and self-deceived, but not heartless, not wicked. Forgive me! Hildegarde has forgiven me!"

It was like a broken-hearted child crying in helpless, lonely repentance, and with a quick movement Hildegarde slipped her arm about the trembling shoulders.

"You will know everything soon," she said. "Then you will see that we have all been to blame—that we all need to pardon and to receive pardon. Forgive now—for Wolff's sake!"

Something quivered in Frau von Arnim's frozen face. The little woman by the tree was crying openly, and her husband turned away as though the light blinded him.

"Nora," Frau von Arnim said.

That was all. Nora took a stumbling step forward; the elder woman caught her and held her. They clung to each other in a moment's agony of grief. Years of life would not have brought them together nor broken their stubborn pride. The hand of death had touched them, and pride and hatred vanished. The barriers had yielded and left free the road from heart to heart.

"Forgive?" Nora whispered brokenly.

Very gently she was drawn towards the closed door.

"Let us go to him," Frau von Arnim said.

It was her forgiveness, and they entered the room together, hand clasped in hand. For one instant Nora shrank back as she saw the white face on the pillow. Then she loosened herself from her companion's clasp and went forward alone. They did not follow her. It was as though at this hour of crisis she had claimed her right above them all, as though without a word she yet demanded back from them what was her own; and they watched her in awed, unbroken silence. She took the white, feeble hand upon the coverlet, and kissed it.

"Wolff!" she whispered. "Wolff!"

No one before had been able to rouse him from that terrible, death-like slumber. His eyes opened, and he smiled peacefully at her.

"My little wife!" he answered faintly.

She crept nearer. She put her arm beneath his head so that he rested like a child against her breast.

"I have come back," she said. "I have brought your papers and your honour. You are to be quite, quite happy. I will tell you everything——"

"Not now," he interrupted gently; "not now. I have so little time."

His voice was pitifully thin and broken. It was as though the great, powerful body had become inhabited by the soul of a child. She drew him closer to her with a movement of infinite tenderness.

"Only one thing—I did not leave you because I did not love you—or because of—any one else. Wolff, you must understand that. I was mad—the thought of war and my own people made me forget all that you were to me. But now I know, and you must know too. You shall not think so badly, so wickedly of me."

He shook his head.

"I think nothing bad of you, Nora."

"You know I love you?"

"You have a good, warm heart," he answered faintly. "You are sorry for me—and I thank you. I am glad that I am going to set you free."

"Wolff!"

For the first time she understood. He did not believe her, and he was dying. The blow was almost annihilating in its force and cruelty. Hitherto she had defied Fate; it crushed her now beneath its inevitableness, and a cry of agonised revolt burst from her lips.

"Wolff, you must believe me! I can't begin life again without you—I can't! You must not leave me—you cannot leave me lonely!"

He smiled.

"Don't you see that it is for the best, my darling? It was not your fault. The sea between is so broad and strong——" He broke off suddenly, and a curious, unsteady light flickered into his glazed eyes. "Don't let her know it is anything—serious," he whispered. "She will be frightened—and she must not be frightened. She has gone, you say? With Arnold? That is a lie. I knew she was going—I sent her. Her mother is ill. The papers——? Oh, my God! my God!"

She clasped him tighter in her arms. The frightful outbreak of delirium—frightful because of its extraordinary yet heart-broken quietness—shook her to the soul. She looked about her, and in an instant Hildegarde was at her side.

"Nora is here," she said. "She will never leave you again. She has brought the papers. They

are safe—the papers are safe."

She repeated the words over and over again, as though she were striving to break through the cloud in which his mind was shrouded. He thrust her from him, dragging himself upright in a stiff attitude of salute.

"Herr General, I am responsible—alone responsible. No one else is to blame. The papers?—I can tell you nothing but that I am responsible. Tell him, Seleneck! Tell him I boasted about them and was careless—anything! Swear—give me your word of honour! I am dying—what does it matter? No, no; you are not to send for her. She is to be happy—and free—among her own people. You must not blame her. It was too hard. We—must forgive each other. Oh, Nora! Nora!

"I am here, Wolff, my darling, my husband! I have come back—I will atone to you with my whole life. You don't know how I love you—more than people, more than country, more than the whole world! I have learnt just in the last hours that there is no one else who matters to me but you, and you alone. I will make you happy—so happy, my dearest!"

In that moment she remembered the power that had been given her, and her voice rang with the exultation of victory. He heard it, and the painful excitement died out of his eyes. The mist of dreams shifted, and he picked up the thread as though the short burst of delirium had never been.

"Nora, why do you look at me like that? What is it you are trying to say to me? There is something new in your face. Nora, help me! I am groping in the dark——"

She held him closer to her, and it seemed to her that the threatening hand of Fate sank, and that Death drew back as from a greater power.

"I am happy, Wolff—happier than I have ever been. I know that our happiness has begun at last."

"It is too late—too late, Nora!"

"Not if you live, my darling. And you will live, because you will not leave me comfortless—because there is another to come who will need you——"

She broke off. He was looking at her as he had once looked at her before—as though he were trying to pierce down to the uttermost depths of her soul. A look of dawning wonder was in his eyes.

"Nora—is it possible——?"

She smiled at him triumphantly through the blinding tears.

"It is possible; it is true. And even if it were not true, I should hold you back alone—with my own hands. I have been through fire, Wolff. I have grown strong, and my strength is my love for you. Don't you know that?"

"*Kleine Frau*, it is so hard to believe, and yet—yes, I believe I *know*! It has come to me suddenly. It is as though a cloud were lifting. Before, you seemed afar off; a great distance separated us, and when you spoke I could not hear or understand what you were saying to me—what you were trying to tell me. Nora, I can hear and understand. Oh, Nora, how good it is to have you again, my little wife! How good God is!"

A change had come over his face. It seemed illuminated from within, so that the shadow of death was forgotten, obliterated by the strength of his joy and love.

"Nora, I believe I have been living for this! I have been like Tristan—do you remember?—fighting back death until my Isolde came. I have been waiting and waiting as he waited. There was a great sea between us; but I knew that you would come in time. I saw you in my dreams—at first a long way off, and then nearer and nearer—Nora! I understand everything—you don't need to tell me: there is a bridge between us; you are quite close to me; you have crossed—my wife!"

He tried to lift her hand, as though he would have kissed it, but his strength failed him and he lay still, with his head resting peacefully against her breast.

Presently he sighed. And with that sigh something in the quiet room seemed to change. The shadows lifted, and through the open doorway the single glittering star upon the solemn fir-tree shone with a greater brightness. Hildegarde knelt down by the bed and buried her face in her hands. The sounds of her smothered sobs alone broke the peaceful hush about them. But Nora seemed not to hear her. She bent, and her lips rested on the quiet, untroubled forehead. A great calm and thankfulness had come over her. She knew that all was well.

Love had pronounced the last triumphant word, and the sea between them had rolled away for ever.

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