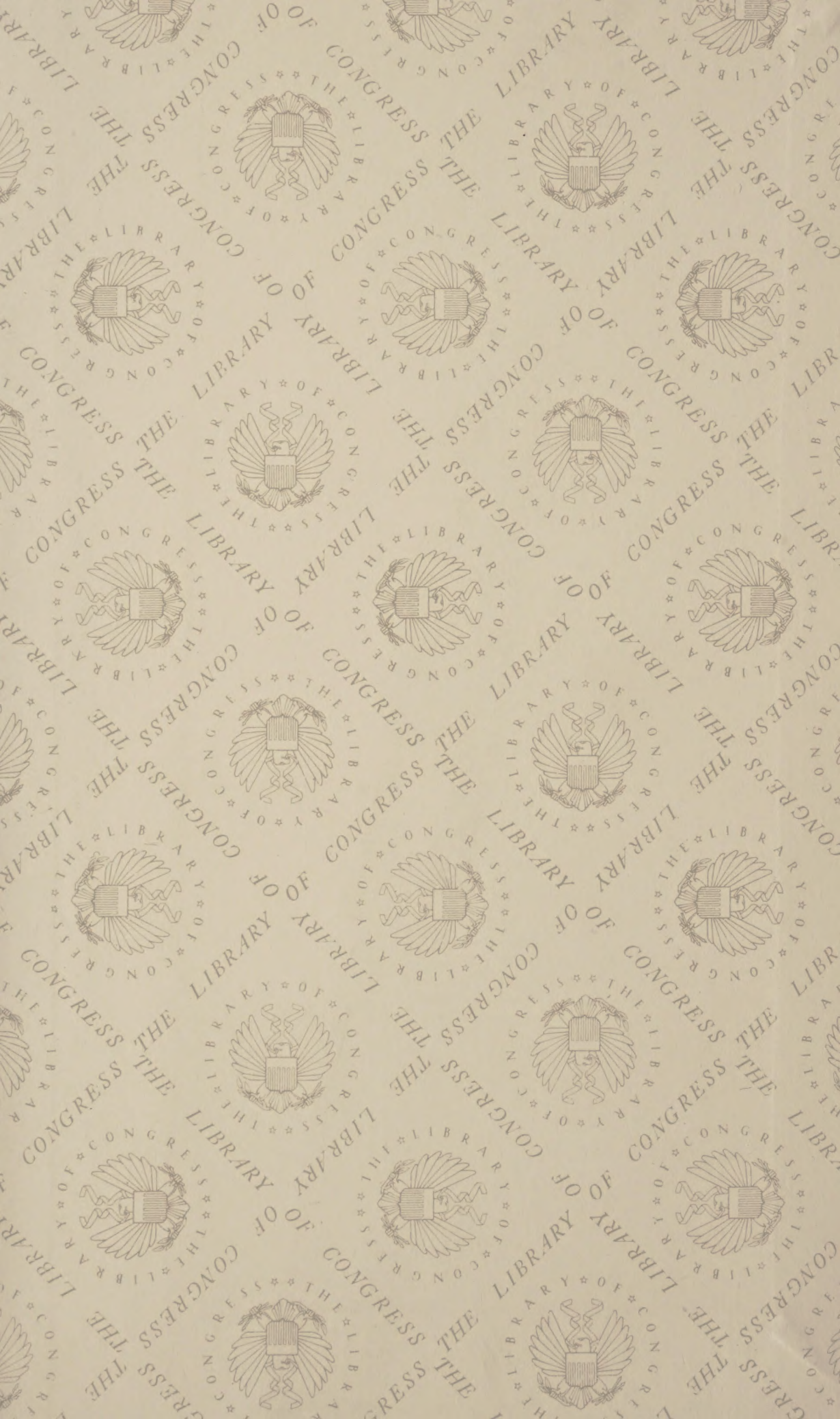


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By DOROTHEA GERARD

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Author of *A SENSITIVE PLANT*, *REATA*, *THE WATERS OF HERCULES*, etc.

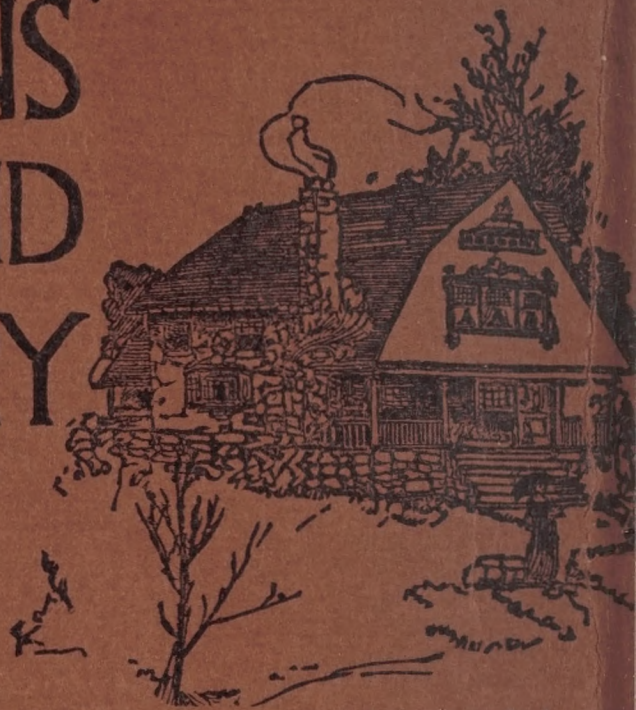


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BY
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AUTHOR OF ORTHODOX, LADY BABY, ETC.
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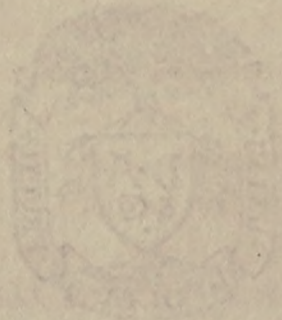
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A QUEEN OF CURDS AND CREAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE INHERITANCE.

ON an April afternoon of the year 1880, three men were holding a serious and somewhat perplexed consultation in the best bedroom of the 'Golden Sun.' The 'Golden Sun' was the only inn of Glockenau, and Glockenau was an Austrian mountain village.

The best bedroom in question had a carpetless floor of clean scrubbed deal boards, a low ceiling supported by dark wooden rafters, whitewashed walls adorned with a few glaring prints of Saints, and, in one corner, a bracket bearing a figure of the Madonna with a bunch of blue hepaticas in a green marbled earthenware jar at its foot.

The two small square windows stood wide open, the well-starched white curtains being pinned back, as though the room were gasping for breath. A little while ago the atmosphere in here had been oppressive; it was heavy still with the scent of wax candles that had not long been extinguished, of violets that had faded in the stifling air, of a censer that had been swung and of which the fumes were now slowly floating out into the village street. The bed, a primitive construction of painted deal, had been dragged into the center of the room. A black cloth covered it; it was bare now of all but a few crushed violet-heads, but the cloth was disordered and the indenture on the pillow showed that a head had pressed it not long ago. There were marks of heavy hob-nailed boots clearly printed off on the white deal boards, leading from the bed to the

door. They were the footsteps of the coffin bearers; for scarcely an hour ago a man had been carried from this room to his grave. Pine-needles and single flower-petals which had been shaken from the funeral wreaths still strewed the floor.

The event had caused great stir in the village. It was only six days ago that the *Stellwagen*, which lumbered up to the door of the 'Golden Sun' every evening, and which generally lumbered on again as empty as it had come, had brought two unexpected visitors to Glockenau: an elderly gentleman and a young girl, his daughter. They had been bound for a further point, but the father had been taken seriously ill between this station and the last and could proceed no further. He leant heavily on his daughter as he descended from the *Stellwagen*, and but for the stout arm of the landlord, who recovered from his astonishment at the sight of so unusual a visitor just barely in time to come to his assistance, he would assuredly have fallen to the ground. The doctor, summoned in haste from the town, pronounced it to be a case of paralysis; neither did it appear to be a first stroke. The stranger's constitution was obviously undermined, and from the first there had been little hope of recovery. He lingered on for four days, unremittingly watched over by his daughter. On the evening of the fourth day he died. It was his closed coffin which had been carried out of this room an hour ago.

The funeral was over. The three men now drawn round the table in deep debate had all been present at it; one of them had in fact conducted it, for the village priest was of the trio. The two others were the landlord of the inn and the notary commissioned by the nearest *Bezirksgericht* with the execution of all requisite legal formalities.

Though neither the landlord nor the priest wore the peasant dress, both were unmistakably peasants. The landlord was an overgrown boy of about fifty, under whose chubby chin the bib of a pinafore would somehow have appeared more in place than the satin cravat which covered his breast. His face had been scrubbed that morning, at least as energetically as any of the deal boards in his scrupulously clean house, and his hair had been so

generously oiled and so conscientiously combed that the marks of the horn-teeth were still clearly visible, like the marks of a rake on a well-kept garden-bed. Altogether so exhaustive had been the attention paid to his personal appearance that day, that some of his best friends had failed to recognize him at the funeral. As the master of the house, in which a stranger—and obviously not a common stranger—had been so condescending as to breathe his last, he had felt this elaborate toilet to be both his duty and his right.

The cast of the priest's features had originally, no doubt, been very much the same as those of the landlord. It was the usual peasant type of that district of Austria—a succession of round curves repeated in eyebrows, eyes, and chin; a short, broad nose, a wide mouth that did not seem to have the faculty of closing tightly, and which made up for its ungainly width by its readiness to smile on the smallest provocation. These features the two men had in common, but here the likeness ceased. No one could suspect the landlord of ever having been hungry in his life, while to look at the priest was to doubt whether he had ever had quite enough to eat. The result was a curious sort of refinement of the originally rudely cut features, a falling-in of the aggressively round curves, a toning down of that all too healthily bucolic complexion, a shrinking away of the superfluous flesh on the massive figure. Old age had done the rest. Forty years ago the priest's hands had very likely been as plump and certainly had been as clumsy as those which the landlord had now planted with widely outspread fingers upon either knee, and his hair in all probability had once been as bushy and brown; the hands were not smaller now and the hair had not become of finer fibre, but the former had bleached almost to whiteness and shrunk to a truly pathetic thinness, and the hair had grown so spare and so silvered that it lay with the dignity of a halo round those sunken temples. Even the awkward peasant slouch of the man of fifty had in the man of seventy become a venerable stoop.

The notary had nothing in common with his two companions; he was small and nimble, with a little bit of a yel-

low sharp-nosed face that might have been fashioned out of a scrap of shrivelled leather. There was something of the cheerfulness, the decision, and rapidity of a sparrow about his manner and his movements; also something of a sparrow's inquisitiveness. He had entered the inn on the morning after the stranger's death, and, in his character of representative of the law, had put the legal seal upon the possessions of the deceased. One large travelling-trunk, on whose surface it would have been hard to discover an inch not covered by the remnants of red or yellow station-label, and a leather portmanteau which had evidently seen better days formed the whole that was visible of these possessions. The seals had now been removed in the presence of the priest and the landlord, who acted as witnesses. By rights the daughter of the deceased should have been present at this act, but the notary had a long drive before him, and so, after having waited what was considered a reasonable time for the return of the young girl whom they had left in the churchyard, it was decided to go through the formalities without further delay.

It had not taken very long to muster the contents of the trunk and portmanteau; they were few, but they were incongruous and surprising. Although the stranger had evidently come from far, he had apparently been travelling with no more than two shirts, which, though repeatedly darned and patched, were of the softest and most delicate fabric. The boots he had had upon his feet when he staggered from the *Stellwagen* to the inn door bore the mark of a first-class Vienna shop, and yet neither in box nor portmanteau was a second pair to be discovered. Again, there was a dressing-case with silver-topped though badly chipped crystal bottles, one of which was half filled with the then so popular *Chypre* scent.

But other things more perplexing still had come to the light of day:—several packs of gold-edged but well-fingered playing cards, for instance; an old blue military looking coat, of the shape of those worn by the hussar officers, but from which the gold cording had long since been removed, and which to all appearances had latterly served as a smoking-jacket. The small sparrow of a notary

was beside himself with excited curiosity; he had spent the last twenty minutes in hopping backwards and forwards between the trunk and the table, poking his beak, as it were, into every hole, and chirruping with delight over each new object which he laid out before the amazed eyes of the two witnesses. Out of the last recesses of the portmanteau he had unearthed his most important prize, a heavy gold seal-ring set with a singularly handsome agate on which was engraved a coat of arms surmounted by a nine-pointed crown. There could be no doubt about the number of the points, they had been counted at least half-a-dozen times over by each of the three men in the room. The ring had been passed from hand to hand and now lay on the table, gazed at by three pairs of awe-stricken and somewhat incredulous eyes. A pause of deep reflection was taking place.

‘That would mean,’ the notary had said, ‘of course only supposing that the ring belonged to him—that would mean that he was a Count.’ And then had followed the pause.

‘And are you *quite* sure, Herr Prell,’ the priest timidly inquired, recovering after a minute, ‘Are you sure that it is only Counts that use nine-pointed crowns?’

‘Five for the nobility, seven for a Baron, nine for a Count,’ briskly responded Herr Prell, becoming himself again.

‘But a Count with one pair of boots?’ said the landlord, with a ponderous head shake. ‘*Are* there Counts of that sort?’

‘There are Counts of all sorts,’ answered the notary cautiously. He was not quite so familiar with the subject as he wished his companions to believe. ‘Besides, I said *if* the ring belonged to him. A word with the daughter will clear that up. It is peculiar that she should have designated her father at the inquest as plain Emil Eldringen. But stop, there are the papers; we may find all we want to know there,’ and the notary suddenly swooped down upon some bundles of papers tied up with narrow yellow ribbon which a connoisseur would have recognised as having come off packets of Havanna cigars.

He could make nothing of the first bundle. Obviously they were all letters, and old letters too, to judge by the

date, the only thing he could decipher; they might have been French, Spanish, or Italian, for aught he knew. He did not wish to commit himself beyond asserting that they were not German. When the old priest had, after a little hesitation, expressed his belief that neither were they Latin, it appeared that the chances of enlightenment were exhausted, for the landlord contented himself with respectfully laying back the letters on the table. He had been to school, it is true, but that was forty years ago, and every art requires to be kept in practice if it is not to fall into decay.

The notary took up a second bundle and untied it; more letters, but German characters this time. He looked at the first and gave another chirrup of satisfaction; it was addressed quite plainly to 'Count Emil Eldringen.'

'At the risk of causing inconvenience,' the letter began, 'I must request you to lose no further delay in repaying to me the sum of six hundred florins which you borrowed from me last autumn, on the expressed stipulation that I was to be reimbursed before spring.' With a face grown suddenly attentive, the notary took up a second letter. This one began with '*Geehrter Herr Graf!*' and was signed with an unmistakably Jewish name, but the drift was much the same and the sum referred to was larger. He took up a third, a fourth letter, more still, and cast a glance into each, and then he leant back in his chair and whistled; the letters were all from unsatisfied creditors, and they all bore quite recent dates.

'There seems to be as little doubt about the title as about the—the embarrassed circumstances,' pronounced Herr Prell, having cast about in his mind for an expression which in presence of that nine-pointed crown would appear sufficiently respectful.

The landlord's ruddy face had gradually become clouded. At every fresh quotation with which Herr Prell had regaled his auditors he had changed the position of his outspread fingers upon his knees. He began to wonder how much the articles in the trunks would fetch, supposing it should come to a compulsory sale.

'But the girl, the—the Countess very likely had the

ready money about her,' he said aloud, following his own train of thought.

'Very likely, and besides people don't travel about like snails with all their worldly goods packed on their backs; all I assert is that the gentleman does not appear to have been prosperous; but, as I say, a word with the daughter—there she comes at last,' and the notary sprang from his chair and gave one hop towards the door. Before he had time to give a second hop the door was opened and a tall young woman advanced into the room.

Of the three men present the notary was, probably, the only one who had any distinct idea about rising in the presence of ladies. In this case he happened to be on his feet already, so that it was not owing to his example that the priest and the landlord, after exchanging a glance of hurried consultation, simultaneously rose from their places. More likely they were acting under the influence of that signet ring on the table, or, more likely still, it was the bearing of the girl herself which influenced them.

She was a magnificent figure, tall, broad-shouldered, developed to perfect womanhood, and with limbs round which the flimsy stuff of her black gown clung just sufficiently to betray their perfect moulding. Had she not been haggard with watching and red-eyed with weeping her face would probably be beautiful,—so much dawned upon the three men who, until this moment, had had no more than cursory and unsatisfactory glimpses of the stranger. It may have dawned upon them too, though more dimly, that it was not the weeping and the watching alone which had given to the face the peculiar stamp it wore. Those lines on the white forehead and about the tightly closed lips had not been drawn by a grief that was only two days old.

It was scarcely to be called a youthful face, there was nothing either girlish in the expression or uncertain in the glance; rather it was the face of a woman who had learnt a lesson and borne a burden far beyond her years. That the burden had not crushed her was to be guessed by the bearing of her head, that she did not intend it to crush her was to be read in the expression of the eyes. Even from under their swollen lids these eyes looked out upon the

world with a glance of steady defiance which millions of hot tears had not sufficed to quench. Of the eyes there could be no doubt that they were beautiful,—of a clear flawless grey set in a distinct rim of black which enhanced their clearness, and, being distinguishable only under a full light, made them appear darker than they actually were. The eyebrows were almost straight and perfectly black, the thick, smooth hair, which she wore in a heavy coil upon her neck, of the very deepest shade of pure brown. The hand with which she held the hat which she had removed from her aching head as she mounted the staircase was of a noble shape, but in its colour and its general appearance it showed that it was a hand which had worked in the literal sense of the word.

At sight of the three men awaiting her she stopped short and looked at each in turn with an astonished question in her eyes. They had not resumed their seats, and the priest and the landlord looked at the notary for assistance. Presently the notary came to the rescue; the reflection that he was in all probability standing in the presence of a real, born Countess had numbed him for a minute, but his eyes chanced to fall on a darn upon the sleeve of her black dress, and with the reflection that the Countess was badly off his confidence had returned. He explained the reason of his presence and that of his companions, and then the question which was torturing him came out with a burst that was no longer to be restrained. He held the signet ring towards her.

‘Was that your father’s property?’

‘Certainly it was his property.’

She spoke in a rich, low voice, looking down upon the little notary in undiminished surprise.

‘Then his name was—his title—he was Count Eldringen?’

‘That was his name, yes,’ said the girl indifferently.

‘And your name then is—your—’

‘Ulrica Eldringen.’

‘Countess Ulrica Eldringen?’ tentatively. ‘If your father was a Count you must be a—’

‘A Countess; yes, I have that misfortune.’

At that moment her glance fell upon the empty bed with its crumpled black cover and crushed flower-heads. She looked away with a shudder, closing her eyes for an instant. Then, as though by a strong effort of will, she deliberately turned back her head and gazed steadily on the spot.

The three men had required this respite to recover from the shock caused by the misapplication of the word 'misfortune.'

'What made you conceal the title at the inquest?' the notary presently asked.

'I was asked for my father's name, not for his title; I gave his name, I supposed that was sufficient. If I had been proud of his title I would have given that too.'

With a shrug of his shoulders, Herr Prell abandoned that point. There was a whole string of questions which it was his duty as well as his delight to ask. She answered them briefly, with a touch of impatience. Had she any brothers or sisters? No. She was then the only child of the deceased? His only child. Was the widow living? No; she had been dead for many years.

'You are then the only person with a claim to the deceased's property?' concluded the notary, having reached the point towards which he had been working.

She assented with a movement of her head.

The notary cleared his throat.

'I must call your attention to the fact that the property actually here present is of so slight a value that its equivalent in money would scarcely suffice to cover the cost of the funeral, or of other expenses incurred,' he added, catching the anxious eye of the landlord. 'But doubtless there is other property elsewhere?'

'My father possessed no other property,' said the girl, steadily, 'beyond the contents of those two boxes and the clothes he had on his back.'

'But surely property in some shape?'

'No property in any shape whatever.'

'But doubtless you are in possession of some ready-money!'

She took a shabby leather purse from her pocket, and,

stepping up to the table, emptied out its entire contents. They consisted of a little over forty florins, in paper and in silver, besides a few copper-pieces.

‘This is every penny of the money I possess in the world,’ she said, speaking with unnecessary and almost harsh distinctness. ‘I presume that this will cover the cost of the funeral?’

There was something in the way she said it which made the three men shrink back, as though the words had been an accusation hurled in their faces, instead of the proclamation of her own beggary. An undefinable sound, something between a whistle and a distressed chirrup, escaped from between Herr Prell’s screwed-up lips, and the landlord passed his hand recklessly through his hair, to the utter destruction of its well pomaded symmetry. The old priest was shaking his head pitifully, and tears of compassion stood in his eyes.

‘My child,’ he said eagerly, laying an unsteady hand upon the girl’s arm, ‘do not let the thought of the expenses distress you, the funeral need not cost anything; I can arrange it so that the expense is defrayed by the parish—we have the right, you know—’ but here he stopped short, startled by the blazing eyes that were suddenly flashed upon him.

‘Do I look so much a beggar that you must offer me alms?’ she broke out, with fierce suddenness. ‘Do you imagine that I could ever again eat or sleep if my father were lying in a pauper’s grave? Every penny—do you hear?—every penny shall be paid; and you need not try to deceive me, I shall find out what the customary price is, and I shall pay all, all, down to the last wax candle and the last bunch of violets—do you hear? Distressed? Who says I look distressed? Does this money here on the table suffice to cover the costs of the funeral or not? That is all I require to know.’

‘Amplly, amplly; it more than suffices,’ stammered the old priest, sinking back on to his seat. ‘There is more than enough for the funeral; but my child, my poor child, how are you to live?’

‘By work,’ she answered briefly. ‘And as for what I

owe you,' she was now looking at the landlord, 'you too shall be paid, you need have no fear. Should the money not suffice, there is my father's watch; it is old, but I think the quality of the gold is good, and there are besides the silver-headed bottles in the dressing-case, which will fetch something, and in the worst case there is the ring. I presume that these things are mine now, since my father has left no other heirs,—or will be mine when this fact is proved?'

The notary cleared his throat again. 'With regard to this question of inheritance,' he observed, 'it is my duty to point out to you that the situation you are in is somewhat peculiar. I must explain to you that according to Austrian law there are two distinct fashions after which an inheritance can be entered on—the conditional and the unconditional. A person who declares himself to be the unconditional heir to the property of any person deceased becomes thereby liable for all claims left unsatisfied by said deceased and for all—'

'Who says that my father has left unsatisfied claims?' She glanced at the litter of things on the table, and perceiving the unfastened bundles of letters a deep-red stain mounted to her cheek.

The notary appeared to collapse to half his size. 'It was impossible to read these letters even cursorily without concluding—'

'And who gave you the right to read these letters?'

'It was my duty, I swear it to you; any one of those papers might have been a will of the deceased, and to ascertain whether a will exists or not—'

'I understand; that will do.' She bit her lip. 'You can go on with your explanation.'

The notary proceeded to put her situation before her. Briefly it was as follows: She had the choice of becoming her father's heiress conditionally or unconditionally. In the former case her father's debts would indeed remain unpaid, but no one of his creditors would have the power to molest her; she would be able to start on her new existence, penniless indeed but unfettered. In the latter case she would have forfeited not only all she possessed at this

moment, but also any fortune she might chance to possess in the future,—up to the exact extent of all claims still extant against her father.

She listened attentively to the explanation. ‘Well?’ she said, when the notary had done speaking, opening her grey eyes full upon him.

‘I presume that your choice is made. It was merely as a matter of form that I felt it right to make the point clear.’

‘Certainly my choice is made.’

‘You are right, it requires no reflection, I have never known a simpler case. When the liabilities amount to several thousand florins and the value of the property probably not to much over a hundred, it would indeed be madness—’

‘Do you call it madness?’ I call it common honesty.’

The notary stared a little. ‘You don’t mean to say that you—’

‘That I intend to clear my father’s name of any reproach that otherwise would rest upon it? Yes, that is what I mean to do; I believe I am strong enough for this.’

‘But what prospect—what remote chance—do you know what you are undertaking?’ cried Herr Prell, aghast. ‘I believe I cannot have explained myself sufficiently. I said—’

‘I know what you said; the explanation was quite plain;’ and she repeated the statement he had made almost word for word. ‘And my answer is that I wish to enter on the inheritance unconditionally.’

‘But you can only do so if you are over age. I don’t believe that you are twenty-four years of age.’

‘I am nineteen, but I am of age before the law; my father took the necessary steps a year ago, when he had his first attack. It can easily be proved.’

‘All the same I entreat you to commit yourself to nothing until you have taken counsel with your relations.’

‘I have no relations with whom I could take counsel.’

‘Your friends then,—every one has friends—’

‘I have none.’

‘But you will at least reflect.’

'Yes, reflect, my child, reflect,' burst out the old priest, who had been listening in considerable bewilderment to the conglomeration of legal terms used, and had not been able to come to any more definite conclusion than that this evidently impetuous young woman was on the point of committing some act which Herr Prell considered foolish and which he therefore, on Herr Prell's authority, accepted as being foolish. 'Your father is in his grave and cannot be harmed by what people say, while you have your life before you.'

Again he stopped short, silenced by the flash of her eyes.

The notary spoke again, and the old priest murmured a few more entreaties to 'reflect,' but it altered nothing in the case. The girl adhered to her resolution.

In this way it was that Ulrica Eldringen, aged nineteen, came to be declared the heiress of forty-two florins, some twenty and odd kreutzers in Austrian money, a gold watch, an engraved signet ring, six silver-topped crystal bottles, an old hussar uniform coat minus the cords, one travelling-trunk, one portmanteau, and various other articles, valued all in all at between one hundred and twenty and one hundred and fifty florins.

It was with this capital at her command that she had pledged herself to pay off the debts left by her father, and which amounted to a sum about half-way between three and four thousand florins.

CHAPTER II.

FANNY BADL.

SOMEWHAT more than twenty years before the day on which Ulrica Eldringen entered upon this her inheritance, the 17th Hussars were celebrating the advent of a new comrade, fresh from the capital.

To the gallant officers who, for the last ten years, had

been dozing away in their little provincial hole, Captain Emil Eldringen's appearance was almost as startling as that of a brilliant meteor might be to drowsy eyes. *Brilliant* was the adjective that best described him. Everything about him sparkled and shone and glittered so blindingly that it was by no means easy to make quite sure of how much depth lay beneath this bright surface. He was brilliantly vivacious, brilliantly gay, and was generally considered to be a brilliant conversationist, though even his most ardent admirers were apt to feel perplexed when asked to produce from their memory a specimen of his conversation.

Added to all this Captain Eldringen was brilliantly handsome.

There was a mixture of races in him. Cast in a Southern mould, he was coloured by a brush dipped in Northern tints. Graceful, supple, ardent as an Italian, he was yet golden-haired, blue-eyed, and fresh-coloured as an Anglo-Saxon. The elder Count Eldringen (South Tyrolese by origin) had, like Emil, served in the Austrian cavalry. Being passionately devoted to hunting, he had made various excursions to England, and from one of these excursions he had brought back a wife, a well-dowered and high-born wife. She became the mother of one son and a daughter, and died before her children were grown up. The widower survived her for eight years, and had the satisfaction of seeing his daughter betrothed in a manner suitable to her rank, seeing that her *fiancé*, besides the necessary hard cash, possessed an array of ancestors who positively lost themselves in the midst of antiquity.

Emil was not yet provided for, but on his behalf the old Count had no anxiety; with his unusual share of good looks and the happy ease of his disposition he would only have to pick and choose among all the eligible brides who might happen to be marketable at the time when his thoughts should turn towards matrimony. As yet they did not turn that way. For the most successful of all the Don Juans then moving in Vienna society, life was very enjoyable as it was. Though the field of his triumphs was different from that on which the great Macedonian king

gathered his laurels, yet, like Alexander, he could boast of never having been conquered in a battle.

Some faint echo of his fame as an eater of hearts had reached even sleepy Ziegelheim, and served to add a zest to the airy sketches of Vienna society with which he enlivened the supper-table on the evening of his arrival. Presently, when he had done answering questions, he began to put some. What were the social resources of Ziegelheim? How stood the chances of amusement? And, above all, who were Ziegelheim beauties?

'We have only got one beauty,' answered one of the lieutenants, 'and that is Fanny Badl.'

'Ah, and who is Fanny Badl?'

Fanny Badl, it appeared, was the daughter of one of the oldest sergeants in the regiment. 'But it is no use making up to her,' was the universal verdict.

'Why not?' asked Emil. 'Is the old man such a Turk?'

'No, it's the girl herself; she's hopelessly well behaved.'

'She's made of ice.'

'No, of wood,' said another, with the bitterness of an unsuccessful wooer, 'and precious tough wood, too.'

'Ice can melt and wood can burn,' laughed Emil; 'I must make her acquaintance to-morrow.'

'Take my advice, Eldringen, and leave it alone,' said one of the older captains. 'We've all burnt our fingers at that pot. She's too good for a plaything, and she knows it.'

'The holes that girl has made in our hearts,' another was saying with a mock-tragical sigh, 'and in our purses! The very carriage which I paid for white camelias last winter came near to ruining me. But *Donnerwetter*, never so much as the tiniest smile of encouragement, and as for the chance of being granted even a five minutes *rendezvous*—'

'Is any one inclined for a bet?' asked Captain Eldringen, suddenly.

He was looked at inquiringly.

'I am ready to make a bet with any one here present that before this day month I shall have obtained a *rendezvous* with Fanny Badl.'

'A meeting granted of her own free will?'

‘Certainly, of her own free will.’

There was a minute’s hesitation. The company at the supper-table scanned the fine figure and handsome features of their new comrade somewhat uncertainly, as though weighing his chances of success. Then another figure seemed to rise before their mind’s eye. The elder captain was the first to shake his head, the lieutenants followed suit.

‘The bet is lost in advance,’ said the captain. .

‘That is my own lookout. Which of you is ready for the wager?’

It was evident that he was serious, and, after a little more parley, the sum was fixed and the bet duly recorded in the elder captain’s note-book.

Emil’s expectations had been raised, and yet when he saw Fanny Badl—which he contrived to do on the very next day—he was forced to confess that they had not been raised unduly. In no Vienna drawing-room, nor behind the coulisses of any Vienna theatre, had he seen such a queenly figure, such heavy brown plaits, such liquid brown eyes, nor such pearly teeth. His interest in the undertaking deepened tenfold on the instant. Having reconnoitred the ground, he had come to the conclusion that a little prudence would be advisable at first. For the present there could be no doubt—strange as the fact might appear to Emil—that her affections were actually centred on the young sergeant with the brown moustache and the sun-burnt face to whom she had been betrothed for two years past. She seemed to be quietly, though not passionately, attached to him—passion, indeed, appeared to lie very far from those tranquil brown eyes and the stately calm of that tall figure.

More than half of the stipulated month had passed before Captain Eldringen had the satisfaction to note the first troubled look in the liquid glance that met his, and the first tremulous blush upon the generally so serene cheek. Yet despite these symptoms it was too plain to Emil’s experienced eye that she was not going to surrender at discretion. The whole of the regiment was looking on, he knew, and pretty nearly the whole of Ziegelheim; it surely could not

be possible that he, the spoilt child of Viennese society, should have found his match at last in this sergent's daughter?

Soon the original object he had had in view began to be lost sight of; the month indeed was past, the bet won, the *rendezvous* obtained—more than one *rendezvous*—and yet Emil, though in the eyes of the world a conqueror, knew that he was in reality conquered. Presently he made an unpleasant discovery; he discovered that he was losing his head. After all, he was barely thirty, and Fanny was very beautiful. He was even at moments visited by an idea which in his lucid intervals made him tremble for his reason: the idea of marrying Fanny, should it be impossible to win her by any other means. Most likely the idea would have died a natural death had not the crisis been brought about by another man's interference. This man was Sergeant Holzer, Fanny Badl's betrothed. Holzer had hitherto been entirely passive. He was a steady, quiet, somewhat slow-thinking young fellow, deeply attached to Fanny. Captain Eldringen's appearance on the scene had at first caused him no anxiety; his confidence in Fanny was unlimited, and for long it did not occur to him that her affection for himself could be anything but as unshakable as his own feelings towards her. For about a fortnight past, however, his habitual quiet had assumed a different and more thoughtful character, while his manner towards the girl remained as gentle and affectionate as ever. Then, quite unexpectedly, one hot Sunday afternoon, Captain Eldringen, being alone in his room and engaged in framing a note to Fanny, heard a resolute tread in the passage, saw the door opposite open and Holzer enter the room with a face which was livid with excitement. He did not immediately recognise the usually stolid sergent; when he had done so the most natural thing would have been to suppose that he was drunk, but somehow this idea did not even occur to Captain Eldringen. He instinctively pushed away the note he had been writing and stood up to face the sergent; Holzer, having entered the room, had closed the door behind him and had then placed himself with his back against it. He was breathing fast

and hard, and his lips twitched convulsively. He kept his right hand pressed over some object which bulged from the pocket of his *blouse*. He had neither knocked at the door nor given the military salute on entering. It was some minutes before he could subdue his panting breath sufficiently to be able to speak, and during these minutes Captain Eldringen waited very quietly in face of the other's agitation; he was beginning to guess what was coming.

At last Holzer spoke:

'I come from Fanny—' he said hoarsely, 'she has told me that she cannot marry me.'

Count Eldringen remained silent, waiting for more; he knew that more must be coming.

'It is you she loves, not me; she has told me so; that is why she cannot marry me. I have come straight from her. What do you intend to do?'

'You are then no longer engaged to her?' asked Captain Eldringen, striving to speak steadily.

'She has withdrawn her word, but I have not withdrawn mine. I have not given her up.'

'If she has withdrawn her word, you are no longer engaged to her; you have therefore no right to ask my intentions.'

'I have not given her up,' said the man doggedly. 'I ask because if your intentions are not honourable I intend to shoot you.' He pressed his hand a little more tightly over the bulging object in his pocket; his haggard eyes were upon the captain.

Count Eldringen was the only lodger on this floor of the house, and the family who lived above had gone to the country for the day. The whole town was pretty well deserted, for Sunday picnics were an institution at Ziegelheim and the day was cloudless. Not a moving figure was to be seen up and down the length of the little dusty street, and no sound came through the open window. The sergeant and the captain were absolutely alone, and the captain understood perfectly that the sergeant was desperate. Also, he had long ago recognised the shape of the object which bulged from the *blouse*. He had the good sense to perceive that, at this moment, he did not count as a cap-

tain nor the other as a sergeant, but that it was a question of man to man, and he had the generosity to accept this position on the instant.

‘Do you know that they are talking of her?’ Holzer was saying, ‘of her and of you? They are making jokes, I heard them—whispering things about her, about her and you, I heard them, I heard them, I tell you; it was that which sent me to her, I asked her and she told me that—what I have told you. And now I ask you. I have loved her for five years; I can bear to give her up, but I cannot bear to see her disgraced. If you love her enough to make her your wife, I will give her up to you, but I will shoot you dead before you make a plaything of her.’

His voice broke a little, and Count Eldringen looked at him with an interest that was not unmixed with emotion. The passionate disturbance of the young sergeant’s face would have sufficed to stab a heart of stone, and Emil’s heart was by no means made of stone—rather of wax. The sight was new to him; in the course of all his gay and glorious experiences he had never seen anything so overwhelmingly genuine as this; it shook him and at the same time it enlightened him. His own passion seemed to catch fire at that of his rival; seen by the light of this terrible grief, Fanny, the object of it, became in one instant ten times as precious and desirable, for Emil was peculiarly susceptible to sudden impression.

‘I have not got your answer,’ said Holzer, after a long minute, during which the two men had been intently reading each other’s faces. ‘Do you intend to marry the girl?’

‘You shall have my answer,’ replied the captain. ‘But I think you will understand that in the face of a threat I can pledge myself to nothing. You have a revolver in your pocket; hand it out or else throw it out of the window, and we can then go on talking. I refuse to speak with a loaded weapon held to my head.’

The sergeant looked into the captain’s face and saw there no sign of fear. He was grave and perfectly self-possessed. Holzer drew the revolver from his pocket and handed it to Captain Eldringen. Emil first proceeded to draw out the bullets, then laid the unloaded revolver

on the table, and turning to Holzer, said calmly and distinctly:

‘I intend to marry the girl. You can leave me now, Sergeant Holzer.’

The interview had not lasted more than five minutes, and not one man in the regiment ever suspected that Sergeant Holzer had been in Captain Eldringen’s rooms that afternoon.

By the next day the engagement was already proclaimed. The sensation which it caused, far beyond the limits of the regiment, was one that was talked of for years after. By Emil’s horror-stricken relations the news was received with blank incredulity, which, however, had perforce to vanish in the face of the printed announcement of the accomplished marriage which followed hard upon the heels of the news of the engagement—for Emil, having once cast the die of his fate, had hurried on the final act by every means in his power. Every Eldringen in Austria now felt that the only thing to be done was to look upon Emil as never having been born.

Emil himself did not begin to come to his senses until the honeymoon, which he had spent with Fanny in Switzerland, was over. Among the glaciers and the rocks he had been aware of nothing but her beauty; but, once having returned to take his place again in society, it slowly began to dawn upon him that the satisfaction of possessing so beautiful a wife had been purchased at a very high price indeed. She had many excellent qualities besides her beauty; she was good and true and she loved him devotedly, but among these excellent qualities adaptability did not figure, and it was adaptability that was wanted here. Barring her beauty, she was in fact intensely commonplace.

Emil had always inclined to extravagance; he now began to throw about his money more recklessly than ever—spending it upon Paris dresses for Fanny which she did not know how to wear, upon riding-horses which it frightened her to ride, upon a thousand costly trifles with which he surrounded her, in the desperate hope of inculcating those tastes which he was used to in women of his own rank.

After a couple of years of mad extravagance, followed by another couple of years of fencing with creditors, Captain Eldringen found himself obliged to leave the army. He first tried a civil appointment, obtained for him by old friends at court, but had to resign it within a year by the desire of his superiors, who feared that Count Eldringen's rather too free use of cards was setting a bad example in the office. Gradually he sank from one position to another, until, one day, when he had been married for about ten years, he discovered that he had to choose between something very like starvation and the acceptance of the position of postmaster in a small provincial town. With characteristic light-heartedness he accepted the position, knowing nothing of its duties.

His taste for display clung to him even now; the chance appearance of an old comrade, or even the mere sight of a hussar or a lancer uniform in the *diligence* stopping at the door of the *Post Haus*, would be sufficient excuse for a champagne supper, at which the talk was all of old reminiscences or military gossip, and in which the postmaster's pay for the next month or so was swallowed up beyond redemption.

His wife had followed his fallen fortunes patiently, without any attempt to arrest him in his downward course. She had never been able to offer him any intellectual resource, and from the moment that he had lost the means of dressing her up and showing her off, Emil also lost the last vestige of interest in her.

He had been in the *Post Haus* for about two years, when the rumours of the champagne suppers were the cause of his losing his position. Fanny, whose health had long been failing under the stress of growing anxiety, did not long survive this new shock.

Emil was now a widower with one child, his daughter Ulrica, aged twelve at the time of her mother's death. It was from the *Post Haus* that father and daughter set out in search of a new existence.

CHAPTER III.

THE VILLA FLORA.

ULRICA ELDRINGEN had never known any real childhood. Her very infancy had been darkened by the shadow which the coming ruin cast before it. Count Eldringen had always remained at heart too much of an aristocrat to allow his daughter anything like free association with the children of mere burghers. She had therefore had no playmates, her pleasures were all solitary and unchildlike, and she had seldom possessed any more entertaining playthings than her father's discarded cigar-boxes, or the tin-foil wrappings of the perfumed cakes of soap which Count Eldringen, even though a beggar, still counted among the necessaries of life. But even with these toys she had not played for long, there had been too much to do, too much work undone lying all around her to let even a child like her sit idle in its midst. Fanny had had the instincts of the German *Hausfrau*, but not the energy. From the moment that her health began to fail, her grasp of the household rein relaxed and gradually fell into Ulrica's hands, for Ulrica had inherited the instinct, and the energy she had found within herself. At eight years old it had seemed to her quite natural that she should order the dinner, at ten she had found it equally natural that she should cook it; for there occasionally arose some difficulty in finding a successor to the one maid-of-all-work, who for long had represented the whole serving power of the establishment, and the last specimen of whom had perhaps decamped in consequence of a long arrear of unpaid wages. Even rougher instruments than cooking-spoons and rolling-pins had been wielded by Ulrica's childish hands, and the use of the broom and the scrubbing-brush was not unfamiliar to her.

The sight of his daughter occupied with these menial services was, of course, very painful to Emil; it was, in fact, so painful that if a hotel were within reach he generally preferred to dine there, rather than see his little Ulrica stag-

gering in under the weight of the soup-tureen. He was very fond of his little girl and proud of her with a tender pride. He even took the trouble to give her English lessons in the leisure intervals in which he was not playing *Macao*, nor drinking champagne with ancient comrades. All his life his mother's tongue had been as familiar to him as his father's, and as Ulrica was quick at picking up things the trouble was not great.

Ulrica's affection for her father was as tender and very much more vehement than that of her father for her. Emil's vivacity, his reckless high spirits even in the midst of adversity, had always had more charm for her than her mother's spiritless apathy. Of her two parents it was to him that her heart was drawn, not drawn, however, with the instinct of one who seeks protection, but rather with the instinct of one who gives it, for the stronger spirit had very early begun to exercise its power over the weaker one.

As Ulrica had known no childhood, so also she knew no girlhood; no girlhood as it is understood in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

From the moment that he turned his back upon the *Post Haus* the widower had become a wanderer; living partly upon his gains at the card-table, partly upon the credit which his title and to some extent also his personal effrontery procured him; drifting about from place to place according to the necessities which might arise of leading creditors astray, or to the prospect of meeting profitable gambling companions. It was not to be wondered at if life very early ceased to have any mysteries for Ulrica. It needs a woman's hand to hold before a woman's eyes that merciful veil which softens the outline of those harsh realities among which we move, and Ulrica, her father's constant companion, was worse than alone. In the gipsy-like existence they led, there could not fail to be moments in which the realisation of her forlorn position came over her with a shock almost of mortal terror. Ulrica well remembered the first of those shocks. The incident had taken place in an obscure provincial town where Count Eldringen, more hard pressed than usual by clamouring creditors, had taken refuge for a time. In the dingy lodg-

ings, which for some weeks had been the abode of father and daughter, the candles burnt on for hours every night, long after the houses all round had grown dark. Ulrica seldom showed herself on these occasions, but she always sat up until the last of her father's guests was gone. He was no longer to be arrested on his downward course—she had long ago recognised this—but her influence over him was great enough occasionally to cut short some more than usually disastrous gambling *séance* which threatened to stretch into daylight. It was on an occasion of this sort, when Ulrica, heavy-eyed from want of sleep, had resolutely entered the card-room, that one of the players who had been keeping himself awake all night with rather more rum and water than his youthful head could stand, threw his arm round her waist and attempted to kiss her. She had pushed him aside in an instant, and with clenched teeth and eyes that had grown suddenly wide awake and wild, she walked straight up to her father.

'That man has insulted me,' she said, pointing her finger at him. 'Make him leave the house, or else throw him out.'

The young man cast a glance of tipsy inquiry at Count Eldringen's face and preferred to leave the house of his own accord. Emil had made a step towards him, his hands clenched and his face aflame with fury; the very picture of a righteously wrathful father who means to stand between his child and her insulter, with a naked sword, if need be. And at that moment he really meant it; the sight of the man's arm round Ulrica's waist had roused in him not only the father but the aristocrat.

'You will never play with that man again,' said Ulrica, when they were alone.

'Play with him!' echoed Count Eldringen, who was striding up and down the room, still panting with indignation; 'touch hands with the miserable wretch who has treated my daughter as he might treat a barmaid? Not though he should go down on his knees for it, shall he ever cross my threshold again.'

A few days later Emil, who had been having some rather dull evenings, put a tentative question to his daugh-

ter: Supposing that the man *did* go down on his knees, figuratively, of course, might it not be possible to reconsider the first decision? A few days' reflection had convinced Count Eldringen that it was to the rum and water solely that his rash act was to be ascribed.

'Are you seriously proposing this?' asked Ulrica, fixing her grey eyes, full of an incredulous wonder, upon her father's face. Emil's own eyes fell before her gaze.

'I was proposing nothing, I was only putting the question,' he answered confusedly. 'Of course you are quite right to feel it in that way. It's a pity, however, that it should have been that fellow of all others; he's about the only man in the place with whom it is worth while to play *Macao*.'

Ulrica, who at that time was still young enough to cherish illusions, believed this to be the final word on the subject.

One evening, about a week after this conversation, she was returning from an errand to the grocer's, and with a small packet of coffee and sugar under her arm, which she was about to prepare for the evening meal, wearily mounting the staircase. There were voices in the room within. Opening the door, she saw her father sitting at the card-table with two players, one of them being the young man in question. Emil glanced up somewhat guiltily. There was a pause of embarrassment while Ulrica stood still in the doorway.

'Will you come outside, I wish to speak to you,' she said at the end of that minute, not moving from her place in the doorway. Emil laid down his cards and followed her out into the passage.

'I did not ask him,' he began, deprecatingly, as soon as the door was closed, 'I can assure you that I did not ask him; he dropped in of his own accord, and as we were just short of one player and as the poor young fellow really seems very sorry—'

Ulrica was standing opposite to her father in the dimly lighted passage.

'That is not the question,' she interrupted; 'the question is: Whose company do you prefer, his or mine? As long

as that man is in the house I shall stay away. You must make up your mind quickly. Here is the coffee and sugar; I am sorry I shall not be able to prepare it for you.'

'You can't mean that, Ulrica, my Ulrichen, you cannot go away; where would you sleep?'

'I don't know; in the street, perhaps;' and she held the parcel towards him. Count Eldringen looked into his daughter's face and then without a word went back into the room.

A few minutes later the offender left the house. He did not again re-enter it, but presently it came to Ulrica's ears by chance that her father visited him in his own lodgings and that the card games had not ceased, but had only been transplanted to a different locality.

Ulrica was fifteen at the time when she was forced to make this first stand in defence of her own dignity. Within the next few years more than one similar occurrence took place. Finding no support in her father, she accustomed herself to rely on no one but on herself alone.

The older the girl grew, the more forcibly was it borne in upon her that, such as she was, she fitted into no one class of society, that she was an unfortunate middle-thing, whose very existence was an insult to social barriers, and that for this sin she was condemned to a life-long penance. She was half noble-born lady, half burgher-girl, consequently she was neither one nor the other. In the course of their wanderings chance had brought Emil and his daughter in contact both with their aristocratic and their plebeian relations. The first of these meetings had taken place one summer in the much patronised *Sommerfrische* Baden, an hour's distance by rail from Vienna. Ulrica had been spending a solitary day in a third-class hotel, when her father entered the room with a tumbled flower in his buttonhole and in the best of possible spirits. He had gone to Vienna that morning for a race-meeting.

'Get out your prettiest gown, Ulrichen,' he said, affectionately patting his daughter's shoulder, 'and have it ready against to-morrow. I have an invitation for you.'

'My prettiest gown is the one with the fewest darns and

the least patches,' replied Ulrica; 'but what do you mean by an invitation?'

'I have promised to take you to dine to-morrow at Countess Tiefenthal's,' was Emil's exultant reply.

'To dine—at Countess Tiefenthal's,' repeated Ulrica with stupefaction. Such an occurrence as being asked to dine anywhere was in her experience almost unprecedented, and being asked to dine with a Countess Tiefenthal was a thing which simply passed her comprehension.

'I met her in the train, coming down just now;' and Count Eldringen launched into an account of the adventure which had led up to the invitation. It was not much of an adventure; an over-filled train, some doubtful and rather hilarious individuals on their way back from the races, their intrusion into a first-class carriage, an elegant but helpless lady sitting unprotected with a maiden daughter on either side—such had been the ingredients of the situation which had given Count Eldringen the opportunity of playing the rescuing knight and of earning the gratitude of these somewhat fluttered females, a gratitude which, reassured by the inscription on Emil's calling-card, had finally culminated in an invitation for next day.

Though Ulrica had received her father's news with a great deal more surprise than pleasure, she made no demur to the arrangement. She could see that his heart was set upon it, and perhaps some faint curiosity was astir within herself.

At the appointed hour next day father and daughter made their way towards the Villa Flora, in which the Tiefertals were passing the summer. A liveried servant ushered them through a cool ante-room filled with what appeared to Ulrica to be banks of great glossy green leaves. She looked about her curiously but not nervously, for self-consciousness did not lie in her nature; hers was the courage of ignorance which goes forward boldly in face of an unknown danger. Had the well-trained footman not been too quick for her she would herself have turned the handle of the door towards which they were being led; she had never had any one to open a door for her before, and she could not imagine the reason of his

hurry. Neither did she understand why her father was mentioning their names to the servant, but before she had found time to put the question to him the door was open and 'Count Eldringen and Countess Eldringen' were announced.

Now at last Ulrica stood still, not owing to any diffidence, but because the artistic and flower-scented twilight which pervaded the room appeared to her to be utter darkness. While crossing the ante-room she had heard voices, but the announcement of their names had been followed by a pause of dead silence. Then she began to distinguish forms and presently faces. A lady, who appeared in some inexplicable way to be swathed from head to foot in one single piece of coffee-coloured lace, rose from an easy-chair and advanced towards the visitors. From another seat which stood nearer to the door another lady, taller and stouter than the first, stood up abruptly. Ulrica heard an exclamation—two exclamations, one from the stout lady, another from her father, who was by her side. She looked at him and perceived that he had flushed scarlet.

The lady who had risen abruptly was his sister, Countess Minart, with whom he had not been in the same room for eighteen years, though he had more than once met her face to face in the streets of Vienna. Between the two the lady in the coffee-coloured lace stood startled and irresolute, looking from one to the other and vainly attempting to grasp the situation.

Countess Minart recovered first, being a woman of considerable nerve. As a subtle blending of the most exquisitely iced civility and the easy ignoring of anything unpleasant, her greeting to her brother was a masterpiece of its kind. The presence of other guests and the necessity of introductions helped to cover the embarrassment of the moment, and presently, the first shock having been weathered and a favourable opportunity having been seized, the hostess, half hysterical with excitement, had withdrawn with Countess Minart into her private boudoir, where a hasty council of war was being held.

'I felt uncomfortable from the moment I gave the invitation,' Countess Tiefenthal was tearfully saying. 'We

had scarcely got home yesterday when H el ene and Clara both took me to task for being so—so impetuous. The dear girls have got so much more presence of mind than I have, you know.’

‘I know it,’ emphatically assented Countess Minart, who was sweeping up and down the room with resolute strides. ‘If you had not got them at your elbow you would be forever committing these blunders.’

‘What was it that was wrong about the girl’s mother?’ timidly inquired the still weeping hostess. ‘Was it the stage, or—’

‘Something much worse than the stage; she was the daughter of a sergeant in Emil’s regiment. Her name was Bandl or Pandl, or something of that sort.’

Countess Tiefenthal sank back in her chair, annihilated by the blow.

‘There was no distinct quarrel, you know, it was a tacit break; we simply gave up communicating with Emil, and, fortunately, Emil had the good sense to see that any attempt at a meeting could only be painful.’

‘And it is I who have brought it about!’ cried Countess Tiefenthal, with a fresh burst of tears. ‘O Chlotilde, what is to be done? Had I not better go in and tell them that your *migraine* has come on? Or perhaps you would prefer not to stay in the house?’ and the distracted hostess looked wildly at the window as though wondering whether its width would be sufficient to enable her resolute but stout friend to effect a hasty exit thence.

‘Don’t be foolish, Lina,’ was the reply. ‘I shall certainly stay in the house; the situation is awkward, but I think I can say that I am equal to it. There must be nothing approaching to an affront so long as they are your guests. We owe that to *ourselves*.’

‘O Chlotilde, how brave you are! My poor, *poor* friend, it must be so trying to you—oh, *can* you ever forgive me?’

The next minute the two Countesses were in each other’s arms, and five minues later, all traces of tears having been removed, they had rejoined the company in the drawing-room, where meanwhile H el ene and Clara had been doing

the honours with an ease and *routine* which fully justified Countess Minart's praise of these perfectly well-regulated damsels.

At the moment of her entrance it had appeared to Ulrica that there were at least twenty people in the room, but the company being presently seated at table, it became clear that there were no more than a dozen in all.

The daughters of the hostess disclosed themselves in this fuller light as two tall, somewhat bony girls of some five- or six-and-twenty, with hard blue eyes and marvellous waists. So frequently had these young ladies been asked in confidence for the name of their staymaker that they generally kept a stock of directions written out, wherewith to oblige their friends.

The other pair of sisters present, the daughters of Emil's stout but still handsome sister, appeared to Ulrica's eyes like a pair of costly biscuit-china figures, so exquisitely delicate to look at that she shrank from touching them, as from something that might break under her hand. Count Minart, their father, was an exhausted looking individual, with pale whiskers, dim eyes, a faint check on his cravat, and a faint perfume of wood-violet hanging about his person. Three bachelors made up the rest of the party. Of these one was an elderly young man, big, stout, with black hair and a fat, clean-shaven face, which gave to his appearance something priestlike, though not by any means ascetic. He answered to the name of Baron Bernersdorf, and appeared to be some sort of near relation to the faint-coloured Count Minart. The two others were youths so perfectly appointed in every detail of their toilet, and turned out after so correct and universal a pattern, that any attempt to individualise them would be vain.

Countess Minart had not overvalued her powers when she declared herself equal to the task before her. Inspired by her example, every other member of the party rose triumphantly to the occasion. The situation was carried off with that smooth and ready tact which is only to be found among people with whom the study of social forms has been raised to the level of a high art. If Ulrica had required to be put at her ease, she could not have failed to

be reassured by the masterly ignoring of the shabbiness of her black stuff gown, or by the truly admirable manner in which the young and comparatively inexperienced Minart girls appeared absolutely not to be aware of the various and somewhat ludicrous blunders into which, during the course of dinner, she fell, for a correctly laid and properly served dinner-table was to Ulrica an entirely unexplored country. That evening, in the privacy of their comfortable bedrooms, the Countesses Theckla and Melanie Minart delighted their younger sisters by a spiritedly acted representation of Ulrica attempting to cut up her ice with a knife and fork, or of the consternation which for a moment was spread over the party, when she had calmly risen from her chair in order to fetch from the sideboard a dish of peas of which she judged that her father would like a second helping; but at the moment of these occurrences there had not been even the ghost of a smile upon the delicately curved lips.

Ulrica herself sat through the meal lost in amazement. She had not even known that such ease, such comfort, such luxury, existed. The glitter of the crystal dishes and the flash of the silver dazzled her; the food set before her seemed of an indescribable and almost unearthly excellence. Once her eye fell upon the hand of the elder of the two Minart sisters, toying with some bread-crumbs on the tablecloth; it looked like a piece of alabaster. From it she looked back at her own hands, reddened with exposure, roughened with work; and that girl opposite her was her cousin, they had the same blood in their veins—was it not strange? What exactly was the difference between them? Was it money alone that made it? No, money was not the dividing barrier here, for through it all, despite the attention of the hostess, of which she enjoyed her full share, despite the faultless civility of the two daughters of the house and the sweet smiles of Theckla and Melanie, Fanny Badl's daughter was never for a moment allowed to forget that such a barrier did actually exist. Nothing but the most perfect breeding could have hit off to a nicety the undefinable yet unmistakable *nuance* which characterised the tone in which Ulrica was addressed as

contrasted to that used by the other members of the party towards each other, and which, while appearing to make her welcome in their midst, yet seemed to be saying continually: 'You are not one of us, and you never can be.'

As for Emil, having rapidly recovered from the shock of the meeting with his sister, he gave himself up to complete enjoyment. Those things that bewildered Ulrica were to him nothing but a delightful return to old, half-forgotten scenes. The line between him and his daughter was exquisitely drawn; for though Emil might be shabbily dressed, and though his eye might be dim and his hand unsteady, as he filled some fair neighbour's glass, yet, for all that, he remained 'one of them.' It was possible to forgive the father for what he had *done*, but it was utterly out of the question to forgive the daughter for what she *was*.

Despite the marvellous display of tact on all sides, there could not, of course, fail to be some openly awkward moments. The choice of subjects of conversation proved more than once a stumbling-block. The very first remark which Ulrica's neighbour addressed to her gave rise to one of these moments. This neighbour was Baron Bernersdorf. She had not done eating her soup before she had taken a violent dislike to this man.

'This is not very neighbourly,' he began in a mock-plaintive tone, after one or two efforts to draw Ulrica into conversation. 'I have made two remarks about the weather and three about the progress of the season, and have only got five monosyllables in return. And yet I almost flatter myself that my conversation is more entertaining than even asparagus soup,' he added, in a more distinctly confidential tone.

'I have got something to eat,' replied Ulrica shortly, 'and I have nothing to say. Besides, I am hungry, if you care to know.'

Baron Bernersdorf made a movement of interest. 'Hungry? You don't say so! What would I not give to be hungry! Every morning I am to be met wandering about the Helenenthal, dismally in search of an appetite, which cruelly eludes me. What is your recipe?'

'If you had eaten nothing since this time yesterday, I suppose you would be hungry too.'

'Oh, you starve yourself? That's not a bad idea. I should almost try it if I were not afraid of being thought eccentric; I like unusual sensations, and this one of being hungry I cannot even recall.'

'I can describe it to you very accurately,' said Ulrica, with a hard smile. 'I go to bed hungry about every second night.'

There happened to be a pause in the conversation as she spoke, so that the words were clearly heard.

'Surely everybody feels hungry at times,' broke in the anxious hostess, rushing to the rescue. 'Don't you remember how hungry we were last summer on the day of our first visit to the picture exhibition? There was no restaurant near enough to go to, and by the time we came out we were ready to drop with hunger, were we not, Clara?' and she looked appealingly at her daughter for a corroboration of the statement.

'That is not what I meant,' said Ulrica, with perfect composure. 'It isn't the want of *restaurants* that has ever made me feel hungry, but the want of money to pay for the food there.'

A moment of painful silence followed. Countess Tiefenthal looked helplessly towards her friend, who immediately stepped into the breach with some random question which turned the current of the talk. This had, perhaps, been the most awkward of the awkward turns which the conversation took during dinner, but it was by no means the last. It was a strain upon the self-possession of the company, for instance, when some recent marriage having been mentioned, Count Minart had in a faint voice, which exactly matched the dimness of his eyes and the sketchy check on his cravat, pronounced the match unsuitable on the ground of the lady not possessing the number of quarterings considered indispensable to conjugal happiness in the circle in which she moved.

'Il s'est encanaillé, tout bonnement,' the Count was saying, when a frown of his wife's and a significant glance towards Ulrica caused his voice to die away into silence.

The dinner had been trying enough, but it was after dinner, when the coffee was being drunk on the veranda, that the strain on Ulrica's nerves reached its highest tension. By this time she had fully comprehended her position and taken her stand. When Clara Tiefenthal civilly offered her a book of photographs to look at, it was almost rudely that she pushed it aside, and when good-natured little Theckla Minart invited her to join the other girls who were strolling round the garden, she was rewarded by so fierce a stare that the poor child fled swiftly back to her companions.

There also not a single rule of politeness had been infringed; it was Ulrica's own fault if she sat alone, gazing about her with sullen eyes, like some animal driven to bay.

'No, I do not belong to these people,' said Ulrica to herself as she was on her way back to the hotel that afternoon. 'They are right—I am not one of them, and I never shall be.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE KAFFEE JAUSE.

THE dinner at the Villa Flora remained an isolated fact, but it had an afterplay, for dating from that day Baron Bernersdorf was forever turning up on her solitary walks.

'Would you join the Tiefenthal girls if you met them in this way?' Ulrica asked him fiercely, on one of these occasions.

'I couldn't meet them in this way,' answered the Baron, perturbed, 'because they never go out without their chaperone.'

'And it is because I have got no chaperone that you think it fair to join me?'

'That's different, don't you see; you have been so differently—what shall we say—brought up? And besides, we're a sort of cousins, you know,' he added quickly, hav-

ing taken warning by her expression. 'We must be, since your aunt's husband is a relation of mine. There can't be any harm in taking a stroll up the Helenenthal with one's cousin.'

Ulrica carefully avoided the Helenenthal henceforward, but Baron Bernersdorf proved unavoidable. She was only seventeen at this time, so she was to be excused for not immediately sounding his dishonourable object to its depth. The day on which it dawned upon her was one of those days to which she owed her sad and premature knowledge of the world.

'It would be lovely if you would spend the autumn in my little Bohemian fortress,' he had said to her one day. 'It's right in the thick of the forest—no one to disturb us in our walks there.'

'In autumn my father intends to go to Ischl,' Ulrica replied indifferently.

'Your father? Oh yes, to be sure; but no doubt you could persuade him to change his mind. And then,' added the Baron, following his train of thought aloud, 'it won't be difficult to find occupation for him. Does your father shoot?'

'He has given it up.'

'That's a pity.'

'Why?'

'Because two are company and three are none. I too have given up shooting—more or less, and I had hoped for some exquisite forenoons in your society. I can see you playing the Chatelaine in velvet and silk; you can't think how velvet and silk would become you.'

'Velvet and silk?' said Ulrica. Her face had completely changed; she was beginning to understand. 'You know that I have got no money.'

'But I have got money,' said the Baron gently.

This time the watchful look in his small, keen eyes and the smile upon his smooth, fat face was not to be mistaken. Ulrica measured him from head to foot slowly, and then turned her back upon him.

'You are a bad man,' she said as she walked away, without looking back.

She recognised now that in the eyes of this highly born libertine she had been fair game all along.

This last incident struck into flame the sullen indignation which, ever since the dinner at the Villa Flora, had been smouldering within her. She told herself that of her own free will she would never again cross the path of any of her father's relations. It was by a natural reaction that from this idea her thoughts should rebound to her other relations, the relations of her mother. She had never thought of them much, and never seen them; her father had avoided them almost as carefully as his own relations had avoided him. Now, all at once, she felt herself drawn with a sudden, yearning curiosity towards that lower burgher class to which the Badls belonged. There, surely, among those simple people, uncontaminated by the breath of society, would she find that warm-hearted welcome which had been refused her elsewhere.

It so happened that this yearning curiosity was soon to find its satisfaction. That very autumn Count Eldringen found himself stranded in a small provincial town where lived a brother of his dead wife's, a certain Josef Badl, a hair-dresser by profession.

When Ulrica, on the day after their arrival, suddenly expressed the wish to make the acquaintance of her mother's brother, Emil, though considerably surprised, offered no resistance.

So Ulrica had her desire. What, however, was her astonishment when she found herself forced to confess that the meeting with the Badls brought her an almost more bitter disappointment than the meeting with the Minarts had brought her. The sight of her mother's name painted plainly in red letters upon a white ground, and surmounting a window in which two curl-chignons, a jetty black one and a pale straw coloured one, were symmetrically disposed on either side of a monstrous plait of hair, had given her the first shock. But it was worse, a great deal worse, when into the small, stuffy parlour, redolent of hair-oil, there timidly slipped a lean, startled-looking individual, with a comb behind his ear, a packet of hair-pins in his hand, and some painfully distinct grease-spots upon his well-worn

coat. This, she was told, was her mother's brother,—her uncle.

The hair-dresser's surprise at this sudden whim of his dead sister's widower and daughter was such that, during the whole of their visit, he never thoroughly recovered the use of his tongue. Fortunately, his wife came very speedily to the rescue.

The want of any substantial proof wherewith to back up her assertions with regard to the aristocratic relations of her husband had long been a sore trial to Frau Badl. Often had indignation come near to choke her as she noted the incredulous smile which Frau Strumpf, the tailor's wife, and Frau Pock, the shoemaker's wife, had smiled into their coffee-cups while listening to her talk. 'Our brother-in-law the Count,' and 'our niece the Countess,' had in time come to be regarded, even in Frau Badl's most intimate circle of acquaintances, as a species of fabulous animals whose existence could not be proved. These fabulous animals, having of their own free will run their necks into the noose, and now sitting entrapped in the hair-dresser's parlour, were not to be so easily released. Frau Badl was nothing if she was not resolute, and even before she flew to her husband's rescue she had rapidly despatched a message to Frau Strumpf and Frau Pock, as well as to various other Fraus of her acquaintance, bidding them to a *Kaffee Jause* in an hour's time. She had seen her opportunity at a glance. There was no hope of an escape, though Count Eldringen feebly resisted and Ulrica wildly caught at excuses. It was only when it dawned upon her that Frau Badl was determined and desperate enough to bar their passage, if necessary, with her own very substantial person, that Ulrica resigned herself to the ordeal which she felt approaching.

The remembrance of that *Kaffee Jause* haunted her forever after. Frau Strumpf and Frau Pock seemed to fuse themselves in her imagination into one monstrous specimen of German middle-class vulgarity. She did not know one from the other. She did not know which was the more trying—Herr Josef Badl's awe-stricken demeanour in the presence of his sister's widower, or Frau Badl's boisterous

attempts at familiarity. She did not know whether to laugh or to cry at the uncalled-for and ostentatious display of that nine-pointed diadem, before whose radiance all present were, figuratively speaking, prostrated in the dust. Then there were their collars and their cuffs and their bonnets and their neckties, and the manner in which they used such things as napkins and handkerchiefs, and through it all there was the penetrating odour of cheap hair-oil.

It was while gazing with a sort of involuntary fascination at the green glass buttons which glittered on a festive garment opposite to her that Ulrica suddenly found herself drawing comparisons between this dress and the delicate, creamy garments worn by Theckla and Melanie Minart at the dinner in the Villa Flora. From having made one comparison she drifted off into more. She looked at the plates, at the spoons, at the wall-paper, at the breathless and perspiring girl who was assisting Frau Badl in her indefatigable efforts to press upon each guest double the number of cups of weak coffee and four times the amount of home-baked cake which an average human digestion can be expected to stand; and each observation was confronted by a memory which dated from the Villa Flora. It was against her will that she drew these comparisons. She was angry with herself—was it possible that she was regarding these honest, well-meaning people with something of the same eyes with which the Minarts and the Tiefenthals had regarded her?

Not till now had she realised how much of a revelation that brief glimpse of luxury and refinement had been to her; it had touched chords within her of whose existence she had been unaware. She told herself now that she had been born cursed with the inherited instinct of a refinement which she possessed no means of satisfying.

‘I belong to these people as little as I do to the others,’ she said to herself that evening; ‘there is no place for me anywhere, I have no right to exist.’

Her state of mind was not so much bitter as defiant; she was too young, too strong, and too conscious of her own youthful strength to be yet embittered. If fate had been hard to her, she told herself that she was equal to grappling

with fate. It was with head held high and clenched teeth that she advanced to meet her future, determined not to be conquered in the fight.

Of her English relations Ulrica knew next to nothing. Among her father's papers there had long lain an old bundle of English letters addressed to her grandmother, Emil's mother, and which by some chance had strayed into his possession. They were letters written by her brother, who had corresponded with her up to her death. Judging by many passages in these letters, this great-uncle of Ulrica's, Sir Arthur Nevyll, must have been possessed of considerable wealth. There were numerous references to his two sons, Gilbert and George, first cousins to her father. In one of the letters was enclosed an old daguerreotype, very faint and faded, representing two small boys in short jackets and wide collars.

'My boys Gilbert and George' was written at the back. Ulrica had often scanned the picture curiously. Since old Countess Eldringen's death there had been little communication between the two families. Emil had learnt the news of his uncle's death from the papers, and shortly after had received a handsome memorial ring which the old gentleman had bequeathed to his Austrian nephew. It was Gilbert, the elder of his two English cousins, who had sent the ring, accompanied by a few brief but friendly lines. Ulrica had been a child at the time, but she remembered the arrival of the ring. Since that time she had heard nothing more of either Gilbert or George.

Ulrica was nineteen when her father, whose constitution, undermined by excesses of every sort, had begun to give way some time previously, was forced to break off one of his desultory journeys, and lay himself down in the best bedroom of the 'Golden Inn' at Glockenau.

CHAPTER V.

GLOCKENAU.

IT was not until the day after the funeral that Ulrica became conscious of a desire to look about her and see how was fashioned the corner of earth on which Fate had cast her. Hitherto she had only been vaguely conscious of the vicinity of pine-woods and of the distant presence of white peaks; she had heard the ripple of water close by and had scented spring blossoms in the air, but it had all been undefined and dreamlike, too inextricably woven in with her grief, too thickly veiled by the tears in her eyes, to have possessed any recognisable physiognomy of its own. It is an old, old truth that the love of a woman for a man, whether it be the love of a wife, a mother, or a daughter, is deeper in exact proportion to the pain and trouble which that man has cost her; and Ulrica had suffered too cruelly, she had watched over her father with too torturing an anxiety, her youth had been too mercilessly sacrificed on the altar of his selfishness, for her not to feel robbed by his death of everything that made life precious to her.

In the morning after the funeral she awoke refreshed from the first unbroken night's rest she had had for a week. The rising sun was straight in her eyes, and the wing of a passing swallow brushed the window with a gentle tap which had in its sound something of a reproach and something of an invitation. Ulrica sat up and looked through the window with eyes that were for the first time for many days aware of what they saw; and what she saw now was so bright with the first sunbeams and so fresh with the morning dew, so smiling and restful and tenderly green, that she felt her pulses stirred with a sudden new courage, a new desire to face life, and, above all, a longing curiosity to see more of this springlike beauty that was framed in the little square window.

Half an hour later she stepped out of the inn door, and

then stood still for a minute to look around her. The village lay in the hollow of a valley which at one end narrowed with a steep rise and disappeared with a sharp curve among the thickly wooded hills, while at the other it gradually widened and flattened out towards a distantly seen plain bounded by a long chain of mountains. A moderately broad river, flowing down from the steep end of the valley, curved round the irregular row of houses which constituted the principal part of Glockenau. It was not so much a street as a jumble of larger and smaller farm-houses, each flanked by a little scrap of garden and generally backed by an orchard which merged without perceptible division into queer little humpbacked green fields that climbed the sides of the valley up to the very shadow of the woods. So white were the orchards that they could not have been whiter had the winter snow come back again.

The whole place was astir already, or rather it had again settled into quiet after the first stir of the morning; the men had gone off to the fields or to the woods, the cows had been driven off to pasture, and their metal bells tinkled fitfully from every corner of the valley. There were open doors on all sides, milk-pails set out to dry along the wall, bunches of blue gentian in earthenware jugs on the sill of some open window; sometimes a couple of children, with cheeks firm and bright as apples, were breakfasting on the door-step and uttered a shy '*Grüß Gott*' as Ulrica passed up the village.

The road grew steeper as she approached the wood, and the valley narrowed; presently she was past the last house, and the pine scent beat fresh and chill upon her face. Her ears were full of the noise of rushing water. The river, which in the wider part of the valley spread its waters so decorously, was here still a wild and unruly mountain goblin, leaping from rock to rock, and chattering gleefully with a hundred tongues. Now and then some tiny, frothy, noisy rill, white as milk and sparkling as champagne, cut its way down the green bank, and tumbled headlong into the river. After a time the whirr of a mill-wheel began to detach itself from the rush of the water.

At the door of the rustic mill-house a friendly-looking woman nodded to Ulrica as she passed. The mill was the last human habitation in this direction. Ulrica had now left the road and was treading a forest-path edged with a mossy rim and powdered with the bronze of fallen pine-needles. The noise of the river reached her from some distance off; here beside her there was nothing but the discreet trickle of a stream, which, to judge from its half-empty bed, must at one time have been of far greater volume. A sharp turn of the path brought her to an open space, at the sight of which she instinctively slackened her steps.

All this time she had had a distinct object in her mind: she wanted to find a spot where she could sit down and think, where she could review her past and lay a plan for her future. And for this she required unbroken solitude. As she came on to this grassy space she felt that she had found what she wanted. An old mill, probably the predecessor of the one she had passed lower down, must have stood here at one time. A few crumbling remnants of the walls still marked the spot, but the brambles had seized upon them and covered them with so thick a tangle as almost entirely to mask the stones. The blossoming white twigs, clouded with purplish pink, floated on each breath of air. The old mill-wheel, fringed with the dead waving grass of last year and choked with tiny sprouting ferns, still stood in the bed of the stream. On the bank a little higher up were flung two round objects which might have been taken for two green velvet cushions placed there side by side—old millstones abandoned there to the moss. Through an opening in the trees the village roofs, half drowned in the sea of white blossoms, could be seen below in the hollow of the valley. Across the plain the mountains, still covered with snow, loomed in the distance like great monuments of white marble piled against the sky.

Ulrica sat down on the most moss-grown of the old millstones and took off her hat, the better to be able to think. The thin thread of water slipping down a block of stone into a little rocky pool alternately murmured and swelled in her ear, like the sound of two voices answering each

other; now a loud hum, now a rippling whisper, and now again a few moments of almost perfect silence, to be broken once more by a busier response. To the mind of most girls of Ulrica's age this secluded corner, with those answering water-voices and its double seat of soft, deep velvet, would have irresistibly suggested a lover's trysting spot; but no such idea crossed Ulrica's mind. Love had as yet found no place in her hard-worked life. In her mind there did not live the image of any one whose presence here, seated by her side on the second moss-grown stone, would have turned this merely beautiful spot to a bit of paradise. She had not come here to dream, but to calculate. With hands clasped on her knees and brows drawn together in earnest thought, Ulrica prepared to face her future.

What exactly was her situation? She stood in the world not only alone, but burdened with a debt of between three and four thousand florins, and she had next to no money. The first urgent necessity was to escape starvation; the second would be to earn money enough to begin paying off a portion of the debts. This would probably take her all her life; but that mattered nothing, so long as she did not die before every breath of reproach was taken from her father's name.

'I am nineteen years old now,' said Ulrica to herself, 'I am very strong, my health is perfect, there is no reason at all why I should not be able to earn money by work of some sort during forty years more. If I pay off a hundred florins every year the debts would probably be cleared by the time I am forty-nine, or at least by the time I am fifty-nine. Of course it will not do to die before then, or even to fall ill. I cannot afford that. The case therefore resolves itself into this: I must find some sort of work which will enable me to lay by one hundred florins every year.'

And now as to the means? Ulrica reflected long over the means, passing in review before her mind's eye the different sorts of work that were to be taken into consideration.

'I would not do as a governess or teacher of any sort,' she reflected, 'for I know very well that my education is

full of gaps; but perhaps I might be useful as a sort of English-speaking companion. I shall send an advertisement to a Vienna paper to-day. But this is not enough, I must have a second string to my bow, in case the first one fails. I think I shall try the "Eldringen Stiftung."

The 'Eldringen Stiftung' was a yearly grant which had been established by the family centuries ago and which was always allotted to an unmarried woman of the name of Eldringen. The only person to whom it would be possible for Ulrica to apply in this matter was her father's sister, Countess Minart; and after a short, sharp tussle with her pride, she resolved to write a few lines to her aunt, announcing her father's death and putting to her the simple question as to what steps she would require to take in order to make good her claims to the 'Eldringen Stiftung.' This letter, as well as the advertisement, should be despatched this very day. And now came the question of the immediate future. A certain number of days must necessarily elapse before she got the replies to her letters; how were these days to be passed? She had paid the bill at the inn up to the present day, but she could spare nothing more for further expenses. At first sight the problem looked insoluble. Ulrica, having sat for some minutes frowning at the pool before her, hearing, though not listening to the two voices of the water, could think of nothing better than her father's gold watch, which she might be able to sell or to pawn. It was not a satisfactory solution, but she had no further time to spend upon reflection just now; those two letters must be written at once.

She walked straight back to the 'Golden Sun,' paused for a moment at the door, and then walked on towards the little church which lay at the extreme lower end of the village. She knew that close beside its east wall there stuck a rough wooden cross in a fresh mound of earth, and she felt that before taking the first step in her new life she must kneel beside that mound once more.

Coming down the street, it had looked as though the church were the last building at this end of the village; but as Ulrica stepped out again by the churchyard gate, she perceived that there was another house beyond, lying only

some fifty yards from the church, and surrounded on three sides by fruit-trees. On the fourth side, the side turned towards the road, this house was built into its own orchard wall. All along the wall and up to the very windows of the old farmhouse green banks swelled fitfully, like grassy waves, and the orchard was so overflowed with its riches that the cherry and apple trees burst over the crumbling stones and rained down their flowers on the passers-by. The place looked uninhabited, most of the windows being closed with faded green shutters. Ulrica went closer, her eye having been caught by a wooden tablet nailed against the wall at about the height of the closed windows. The tablet bore a date of eleven years back, and the inscription upon it recorded that on the 12th of August of that year the water had reached the height here marked. The water? Ulrica looked round her in surprise; so quiet and well-behaved had the unruly mountain urchin become in this lowest level of the valley that she had almost forgotten its vicinity. It was close by, nevertheless, just across the road, but flowing so peacefully and looking so unformidable between its low grassy banks that the dry bare statement of that tablet on the farmhouse wall looked like an unwarrantable calumny. A narrow foot-bridge crossed the river at this point and a brightly painted wooden cross stood upon the near bank.

Having once more reached the inn, Ulrica wrote her two letters, the one to Countess Minart and the other to an advertising office in Vienna. As she looked through her papers in search of Countess Minart's address, another address fell into her hands. It was that of Sir Gilbert Nevyll, her father's English cousin, the same through whose hands the memorial ring had been sent and the same whose portrait as a small boy was familiar to Ulrica. It came back to her mind how, a year ago, when her father had thought himself dying, he had expressed the wish that the news of his death should be conveyed to his English relatives; remembering this now, Ulrica wrote a few lines to this unknown cousin, with a bare statement of the event. This done, she thought no more about the matter; she was not even certain that the letter would

reach the right person's hands, seeing that the address she had found dated from a dozen years back and that no communication had taken place since. Gilbert Nevyl might be dead for aught she knew.

With her three letters in her hand she descended the stairs, and was immediately greeted by the sound of the landlady's voice coming from some back region and raised to that high pitch of voluble irritation which seems to render the drawing of breath between whiles a quite dispensable proceeding. The landlady was the very person whom Ulrica was in search of, in order to consult her as to the sale of the watch. It was to the kitchen that she tracked the owner of the voice, having first in the doorway run against a blubbering girl who was holding her apron to her eyes, obviously the victim at whose head this inexhaustible string of epithets was being hurled. The landlady was standing at a table, with one hand stirring some messy-looking stuff in a bowl, with the other sweeping potato parings from off the table into a pail on the floor, and all the time keeping one eye upon a simmering pot on the fire. She was a spare, middle-aged woman, with a face which the sun had browned and kitchen heat had reddened, a brisk manner, and quick eyes. She was dressed like any other peasant woman of the place, in a short voluminous woollen skirt, black laced bodice and full white sleeves, coloured woollen stockings and stout shoes, and with a black silk handkerchief knotted round her head. Her appearance now was of extreme irritation and flurry. At sight of Ulrica she broke off her harangue and stared inquiringly at her guest.

'What on earth has that poor girl done?' asked Ulrica. 'You looked just now as though you were going to throw the pigs' pail at her head.'

'What has she *not* done, you might ask me,' was the grumbling response. 'She hasn't set fire to the house yet, and she hasn't poisoned the pigs, but she's done pretty much everything else she had a chance to; emptied half the salt-box into the yesterday's soup, and put the lamp-oil into the salad on Thursday, and the loaves left in the oven

till they were as black as my shoes; and as for the *Gugelhupfs*—

‘Is she ill?’ inquired Ulrica. ‘What is the matter with her?’

‘It’s the Bachmeier’s Michl—that’s the matter with her,’ answered the landlady grimly.

‘You mean that she is in love?’ said Ulrica, in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. ‘Cooks and kitchen-maids in love are certainly very inconvenient things. Have you reasoned with her?’

‘She’s beyond reason; I’ve packed her about her business, though which way I’m to turn for another pair of hands in the kitchen the good God alone knows. And two weddings coming on this week, and all the white loaves and the *Gugelhupfs* to bake. I bore it as long as I could, but anything’s better than a girl who sits herself down on the top of a basketful of eggs in order to think of her Michl!’

‘Have you no daughters to help you?’

‘I haven’t any daughters, just my soldier son—’

Hiss—ss at that moment went the pot on the fire, and the landlady, abandoning the mixture she was stirring, sprung to the rescue. By the time the sputtering and hissing had subsided she had apparently come to a resolution; the boiling over of that pot had evidently been the last straw. Instead of returning to the table she wiped her hands on a duster and put her silk handkerchief straight on her head.

‘I am going to step across to some of the neighbours,’ she said to Ulrica, who still stood by the table; ‘perhaps I can get in a girl to help. I can’t go on this way. Was it anything you wanted to ask me that brought you in here?’

‘Yes, I had a question to ask, but I have changed my mind about it; I shall make a suggestion instead. Since you want some one to help you in the kitchen, why should you not employ me?’

The landlady stared incredulously. ‘You? But I thought you were a *Grafin*?’

‘Yes, I am a Grafyn, but that need not matter.’

‘But Grafyns don’t cook, do they, nor wash up dishes, nor anything of that sort?’

‘Not as a rule; but I can both cook and wash up dishes. Listen to me a minute, the case is very simple. I have paid you every penny of what I owe you up to to-day, but I have no money to pay you with beyond to-day, and yet it is necessary for me to stay on here a little time longer, perhaps a week or two. I therefore propose to you that since I cannot pay you in money I should pay you by my services in the kitchen. I think you would find me useful. I am very strong, and I have got no Michl to think about, so I am not likely to sit down on a basket of eggs. Tell me whether you think the proposal fair?’

The landlady was beginning to recover from her surprise. To her rustic mind the nine-pointed crown was not nearly so distinct a thing, and therefore not nearly so overwhelming as it would have been to a middle-class mind; as it had been to the hair-dresser’s wife or to Frau Strumpf, for instance. The obvious poverty of the particular Countess in question, moreover, did much to reduce her awe of the title, for she was an eminently practical woman. The advantages of the situation began to dawn upon her.

‘Do you mean that you would ask no wages?’ she inquired.

‘No, I ask only for a bed to sleep on and for my food.’

‘If I knew how much you have learnt—’ began the landlady doubtfully. Ulrica pulled off her gloves and looked round her.

‘That you shall see for yourself. Where is there anything to do? Oh, that dough is waiting to be kneaded—why, it will be tough in two minutes,’ and she rolled up her sleeves over a pair of arms that were as firm and as magnificently rounded as though they had been hewn out of marble, and vigorously attacked the dough. There was several minutes’ silence, during which Ulrica worked away, while the landlady’s sharp eye watched her manipulations with the kneading-board and the rolling-pin, and then the landlady said: ‘Yes, I think you can help me: you can have your bed and your food.’

And so it was settled. This was a better solution than the watch, thought Ulrica. Both parties were satisfied with their bargain. The two weddings were got through successfully: never had there been such delicious *Gugelhupfs* nor such white loaves seen at any wedding feast in the village.

At the end of a week Ulrica got the first letter; it was the answer from Countess Minart. The epistle began with a set phrase of condolence and ended with an offer of money. Ulrica's question was answered as follows:—

‘You appear to be labouring under some curious misapprehension with regard to the “Eldringen Stiftung.” This family institution was created by a Count Gustave Eldringen in the year 1660, for the express purpose of providing for unmarried females of the name of Eldringen whose means might not suffice for a mode of life such as the position of the family demands. It seems almost superfluous to add that, these being the sentiments by which my ancestor was guided, the first condition attached to the granting of this position is the perfect purity of descent of the recipient. For the daughter of any Eldringen who had allied himself below his rank, my ancestor did not consider himself called upon to provide. Since you ask me a plain question I have no choice but to give you a plain answer.’

Ulrica's brow was flaming as she crushed up the letter in her hand. She was furious with herself for having written to this woman. Henceforward she would take advice from no one. Her hopes were now centred upon the result of her advertisement, but she was not to cherish these for long. The next week indeed brought a communication from the *Vienna Bureau*; two ladies had replied to her notice. The first letter was a closely written and exhaustive string of questions as to her qualifications as a companion. What other language could she speak besides English? What instruments did she play? Was her disposition gay and cheerful? Could she undertake to keep up lively and interesting talk such as would divert

the mind of a low-spirited old lady from brooding over her family misfortunes? Was she thoroughly well-versed in both crochet and fancy knitting? It was evident that the writer of the letter was determined to have the value of her money; the fluent quotation of poetry, the intimate knowledge of history, and the acquaintance with several specified games of cards were all made the subjects of questions in a postscript which literally bristled with points of interrogation.

The writer of the second letter appeared at first sight to be easier to deal with; she was the widow of a manufacturer living alone in the country, and seemed modest in her requirements. Several letters passed between this lady and Ulrica, and matters seemed to be progressing towards a satisfactory conclusion when, all at once, the manufacturer's widow drew back. She had only just discovered the existence of Ulrica's title, and the idea of having a Countess for her daily companion had evidently been too much for her nerves.

The various other attempts which Ulrica made were as so many failures; either she could not fulfil the demands put to her, or else her title was the obstacle. Those who were not frightened off by it were suspicious. That a Countess Eldringen should be reduced to gaining her livelihood seemed to suggest to many people's minds that there must be a screw loose somewhere about her career. Ulrica began to realize that the nine points of that diadem, for which so many vulgar minds would no doubt envy her, were very sharp points indeed; that they entered into her flesh like so many thorns; that they bristled across her path like a hedge which cut her off from more than one honourable employment. Finally she decided that she had no more money to spend on advertisements, and gave up the attempt. On the same day that she wrote to withdraw the advertisement she made a new proposition to the landlady; she offered to remain in her service for six months longer, announcing at the same time that from this day forward she would ask for wages. Six florins a month was what she stipulated, which is about equivalent to six pounds a year, not quite so much as most scullery-maids get in Eng-

land, but in the eyes of a rustic Austrian landlady an enormous sum.

Ulrica, however, was perfectly well aware of the value of her services, and trusted that the business instinct of this particular landlady would convince her that she would be no loser by the arrangement. She had calculated quite rightly, for after a short demur the terms were accepted.

In this way Ulrica had gained six months' breathing time, at the end of which she would have laid by close upon forty florins, enough to enable her to live for at least a few weeks in Vienna, for she had long since come to the conclusion that the only chance of obtaining employment there lay in being on the spot.

During several weeks more her plan worked smoothly, and then came the first check.

CHAPTER VI.

PATER SEPP.

'WE shall have to be thinking of the puddings and cakes for next Thursday,' the landlady said to Ulrica one day. 'Franzl will be home on Wednesday night, and with a fine appetite, if I know him rightly.'

Franzl was the only son and heir of the house, who had left home three and a half years before, as a recruit, and who had deeply disappointed his mother by not returning to the village in October last, his time having then expired. Franzl wished to remain a soldier, while it was the yearning of his mother's heart to mould him into a landlord after the pattern of his father. She had laid out his entire future for him, including the choice of a wife, having for this purpose selected the daughter of the wealthy 'Apfel Bauer.' The overtures made to the Apfel Bauer had been favourably received, and there was nothing now wanting but for Franzl to come home and win Mirzl's heart, or at any rate lay claim to it, for that article was understood to have

belonged to him since the time of their common school-going days. All this Ulrica had heard of from the landlady, and she had also had the bride-elect pointed out to her in church—a round dumpling of a girl with a good-natured blue-eyed stare and a pair of yellow plaits pinned round her head.

The cakes being baked and the ingredients for the puddings weighed out, Ulrica dismissed all recollection of the returning soldier from her mind, until, on entering the kitchen on the Wednesday evening, she found herself confronted by an unknown young man in uniform, who, after one deep gape of astonishment, rose to his feet and saluted her in the military fashion.

‘This is our Franzl,’ said the landlady proudly, while the big boyish landlord beat a blushing retreat, as he invariably did before Ulrica. He was of a much less independent turn of mind than his wife, and could not succeed in being at his ease in the presence of this titled ‘kitchen help.’

‘He’s trying to make out that he’s only come home on a visit,’ the landlady was saying, ‘and that he must be back with his regiment again next week. I’ve been telling him that the cakes won’t even be eaten up by that time, eh, Franzl?’

But Franzl did not appear to hear. He was staring at Ulrica as she moved about the kitchen. Presently, when she had gone out again, he observed to his mother:

‘Is that the lady who helps you to bake the cakes?’

‘Lady? Well, they say she’s a Countess, but she’s in my service, and I pay her six florins a month; she’s worth it, though.’

‘I should think so!’ answered the young soldier, somewhat more hotly than the occasion seemed to demand. Five minutes later he added: ‘It may be that the week after next would be time enough for my getting back to the regiment.’

The landlady had long ago settled in her mind that neither the week after next nor any other week should he go back to the regiment, but she thought it wiser to acquiesce. Even this slight cooling down of his martial

ardour was something to have gained, and so rapidly did this cooling process go on during the next few days, that by rights the landlady's maternal heart ought to have beat high with hope. The maternal eye, however, was in this case remarkably keen, and there was something just a trifle suspicious in the rapidity of the process. It was just as it should be, of course, that Franzl should show symptoms of a newly developed taste in village life, but this taste need not have taken the shape of a continual haunting of the kitchen and offers of service, which were generally more well meant than practical, and occasionally were even destructive. Within the first three days of his return, the energetic young soldier had reduced two coffee cups and five plates to shivers, had severely scalded the cat's back by the upsetting of a pot of boiling water, and had twice kicked over the pigs' pail in his hurry to relieve Ulrica of the tray that she was carrying. Soon it began to occur to the landlady that a fine, young, healthy soldier son of this description, though certainly something to be proud of, might yet prove a rather expensive article in a kitchen, or even out of a kitchen. It was months before the good woman forgot the shock she received when, having thought to dispose of Franzl for a time by sending him out to cut grass for the goat, the gallant young warrior reappeared, bearing an armful of green wheat, at the same time cheerfully announcing that he had thought it was better to do the thing thoroughly since he was about it, for which reason he had mown down the whole patch at a go, so that the goat would be well provided for for some days to come.

'It all comes of his interest in his new life and his eagerness to learn,' said the landlord, with fatherly leniency; 'just you see, Lenerl, whether he doesn't do splendidly yet. It was only yesterday that he told me how he'd almost made up his mind to give up the soldiering and take up the inn after me. That shows clear enough, surely, that he is coming round to Mirzl, for every one knows that the first thing an inn-keeper requires is a wife.'

'It may be,' said the landlady drily, 'but he hasn't fetched her out once yet that I know of.'

But the fond father was not to be damped; and when, on the eve of one of the great 'church days' of the village, Franzl spontaneously offered to assist his father in the attendance on the guests who were expected to appear in large numbers on the morrow, in order, as he said, to take his first lesson in the duties of a landlord, the honest man positively chuckled at this rapid fulfilment of his prophecy.

Nor, in the course of the busy and noisy afternoon that followed, did the landlord see any cause for a diminution of his exultation. It is true that Franzl's manner of striding across the inn-garden was more that of a soldier advancing to an attack than that of an embryo landlord anxious for the entertainment of his guests, and that while taking his turn in the *Kegelbahn*—never wanting in any Austrian inn-garden—he seemed to regard the ball more in the light of a cannon-ball to be hurled at an enemy's head than of a harmless wooden globe destined for the knocking down of nine-pins. The nine-pins which he knocked down were indeed few, and the toes of unwary lookers-on with which he came in painful contact were on the other hand many, but all this was only superfluous energy and would soften down in time, the landlord argued. He had much to learn from his father, the *habitués* of the beer-garden admitted, and especially in the conversational line, seeing that he was far from having the elder's knack of entertaining his guests with appropriate remarks thrown in to the conversations going on at the various tables, remarks which chiefly concerned the weather or the prospects of the hay-season or of the apple harvest; yet it was agreed on all hands that, with a little training, Franzl 'would do.'

It was late before the garden was deserted, and only after the last guest had departed did Ulrica come down from the tiny back-room in which she now lodged. She had stipulated that on occasions of this sort she should remain invisible, and accordingly she had spent the afternoon alone, busying herself with the sewing on of buttons, the fastening of tapes, and various other small repairs about her scanty wardrobe, while the hum of voices in the garden below, the roll of the ball in the *Kegelbahn*, followed by

the dull thud of the falling nine-pins, had come to her through the open window. Under the heavy branches of the horse-chestnut trees it was all but dark already, as she now moved about from one deserted table to another collecting the empty beer-glasses. She had got both her hands full and was just considering whether a tray would not be the simplest solution of the difficulty, when some one stepped unexpectedly out of the shadow of the trees and rapidly possessed himself of the glasses in her hand. She recognised Franzl, still flushed with the success of the afternoon.

‘It would be very much wiser,’ remarked Ulrica as she yielded up the glasses, ‘if you were to leave me these and clear some of the other tables over there; there are at least twenty more glasses at that other end, not to speak of plates and knives and salt-cellars.’

She spoke in the most business-like of tones, never having troubled her head as to the possible motives of Franzl’s officiousness. During these past ten days she had accepted his awkward services with a sort of amused wonder, not untouched by gratitude.

‘But I am going to clear the tables over there too,’ said Franzl gaily. ‘Don’t, please don’t,’ as Ulrica moved on to the next table. ‘If you knew how it hurts me to see you at work, I am sure you would sit down at once with your hands in your lap.’

Ulrica very rarely laughed, but Franzl’s tone was now so tragi-comical that she broke off into a short laugh.

‘But there is nothing that would make me more miserable than sitting with my hands in my lap; and, besides, your mother pays me for working.’

‘But you were not made for that, any one can see that; perhaps I see it better than the others because I have been away from home and have seen what real ladies look like. You are made to sit in a carriage like the daughters of our Herr Oberst and to wear hats with long feathers in them.’

‘But carriages and feathers cost money, Franzl,’ said Ulrica, considerably amused, ‘and, unhappily, I have got none.’

Franzl suddenly became very grave. Down went the

beer-glasses on to the table with a loud rattle, and he stepped close up to Ulrica.

'Is it true that you have no money at all? That you are actually quite, quite poor?'

'Yes, that is perfectly true.'

'Do you think me very rough and bad mannered?' was Franzl's next unexpected question.

'Well, I think you might learn to move about a little more carefully,' answered Ulrica, somewhat startled by the change of topic.

'And my manners might be improved in time, might they not? Manners *can* be improved, can't they, if one tries very hard?'

'I suppose they can. But what makes you ask me these questions now?'

'It is because I have been thinking,' said Franzl diffidently, 'that if you don't think me so very bad you might perhaps make up your mind to marry me. Of course I know that I am not really good enough for you, but then, even though you are a *Grafin*, you have told me yourself that you have got no money, and I should have enough for both, for my father has laid by a good deal, and the "Golden Sun" is the only inn in the village. It might not be worse for you, after all,' added Franzl humbly, 'than having to work as you do now; and if you will have me you need never work again, there would be quite enough money to keep another girl. I lay awake all last night thinking of it; I hate the landlord business, but I shall learn it if it can save you from working.'

Ulrica had been listening in stupefaction; she began by being under the impression that this was a joke, but the growing earnestness of Franzl's tone could not fail very rapidly to bear conviction to her mind. She stood opposite to him, unable yet fully to grasp the fact that this young peasant was in perfect good faith, and with the broadest of rural accents asking her to marry him. She had not recovered her presence of mind sufficiently to make any answer, when Franzl, apparently encouraged by her silence, came a step nearer and seized her hand. His diffidence had vanished, he was now the bold soldier, de-

terminated to risk a headlong attack, and in this new aspect and under the influence of the growing excitement which showed itself in his flushed face and burning eyes, he became all at once distinctly offensive to Ulrica's finer sensibilities. Up to this moment she had found him merely mildly amusing.

'I am not so bad, am I?' he questioned eagerly, with a sort of affectionate familiarity dawning in his tone, 'nor so bad-looking either? There are lots of girls in the village who would take me, even without the "Golden Sun"; there's that yellow-haired Mirzl, for instance, whom my mother wants me to marry; but I could never marry any yellow-haired woman after having once seen you.'

His peasant accent broadened with his eagerness, Ulrica could feel upon her face his hot breath, tainted with the scent of the cheapest of tobaccos.

'You must be mad!' she cried, as she tore away her hand, 'you must be mad or drunk; *I* your wife? *You* my husband? You have forgotten who you are and who I am,' and, turning her back upon him, her head haughtily erect, her lips trembling passionately, she left him standing alone under the horse-chestnut trees, beside the empty beer-glasses.

Having reached her room, she turned the key in the door and sat down upon her bed. Her nerves were still tingling with the annoyance of the scene just passed. The surprise had been overwhelming; the landlord's son had appeared to her as belonging to such a totally distinct category of beings that the idea of his being in love with her had never once come within the range of her conceptions. For the first ten minutes after she had locked herself in, she positively hated Franzl for having dared to lift his eyes to her. Gradually, however, as her pulses calmed down, a more sober view of the situation began to obtrude itself upon her mind. Franzl, after all, had not had to lift his eyes so very high in order to rest them upon her; what was the great difference between them? She had proudly reproached him with forgetting who she was and who he was, but, looking at the matter closely, who was she? A friendless, penniless girl with a useless title tacked on to

her name. And he? A well-to-do youth with a distinct place assigned to him in the world and a comfortable home, which he was honestly and honourably ready to share with her. Decidedly he had a far better right to existence than she had. No, it was not Franzl who was to blame for the whole hideous incongruity of the situation; this was only one of the many absurdities inseparable from her one-sided and wholly unsatisfactory position. As she sat on her bed thinking over the scene under the horse-chestnut trees, Ulrica did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

She was still sitting thus when she heard the landlady's step in the passage and presently her hand fumbling at the door. Ulrica went to the door and unlocked it. The landlady walked up to the table with a certain set expression of face which Ulrica had learnt to know well, and deliberately laid down three paper florins one beside the other, passing each florin between her fingers before putting it down, in order to assure herself that no second florin was sticking to it. During this process, and despite the accuracy with which it was carried out, Ulrica had occasion to observe that the woman's fingers were shaking, and she immediately began to foresee what was coming. She preferred to meet it half-way.

'You want me to go,' she said, not as a question but as an assertion.

'Yes,' said the landlady, laying down the third paper florin. 'There is no other way; you must go. I know I shall never get another girl like you in the kitchen, but there is no other way. Here are the wages I owe you for the next fortnight.'

'So you wish to turn me out of the house? Is it to be to-night?'

'I should like best to turn you out of the village, if I could,' replied the other, not in the least unkindly, but as stating a self-evident fact, 'only that I haven't the right to do that. To-morrow will do, however, for your leaving, so long as you keep up here till then, and don't let Franzl catch you on the staircase,' she added, with a suspicious look at Ulrica.

'It will be the worse for him if he does,' said Ulrica coldly.

'Oh, as for that,' and the landlady bristled a little, 'I don't see that any one need look higher than my Franzl, even if they *have* the right to call themselves Countesses; but it's just as well that you're sensible about it, for, Countess or no Countess, I would never have suffered you to become Franzl's wife. It isn't titles we want here, it's a good plump purse, such as the Apfel Bauer will be able to give to Mirzl. And that's why you must go, for as long as you're here he'll never look at Mirzl. The boy's just half distracted. They're queer certainly, these boys; I never myself could see that you were especially good-looking, but I suppose you must be, from the way Franzl is going on. I don't understand girls not having light hair, I'm used to it; but Franzl has been out in the world and has seen women with all manner of hair, I suppose that makes the difference. You'll go to-morrow morning without a noise, won't you? I haven't any grudge against you, but you won't do for my Franzl, you understand that, don't you?'

'Perfectly,' replied Ulrica, without any bitterness this time. There was something perfectly congenial to her in this business-like and dispassionate way of viewing the situation. She felt as little grudge against the landlady as the landlady felt against her; the two women looked at each other quite calmly, almost in a friendly manner, across the deal table on which the three florins lay.

'I shall certainly go to-morrow morning. Could you by any chance suggest where I am to go to?'

'Well, I've been thinking of that as well, and it came into my mind that the schoolmaster's daughters were on the lookout for some one that could help them to finish their new summer dresses. I can't say for certain that they would take you in, of course, nor whether your sewing would be good enough for them; but you might try, and very likely it would give you a roof over your head for a week or two.'

'The schoolmaster doesn't happen to have a son too, does he?'

The landlady stared for a minute.

'Oh, I see what you mean. No, there is no son, so there wouldn't be any difficulty of that kind. Besides, as I told you, you are not likely to suit the taste of many people here. Franzl is an exception. You are too different from what they're used to, you know.'

'That is satisfactory, certainly. Yes, I will try the schoolmaster to-morrow.'

Next morning as Ulrica, having packed up her few possessions and consigned her box to the landlady's charge until sent for, stepped out of the inn door in order to 'try the schoolmaster,' a letter with an English postmark was put into her hand. It was from her father's English cousin, Sir Gilbert Nevyll, and was written in reply to the announcement of his death. She read it as she slowly walked up the village street towards the schoolhouse, which was situated at the upper end. It was as follows:—

'MORTON HALL, *April 17th*, 1880.

'MY DEAR COUSIN: Owing to an absence from home I have only to-day received your communication, else you should have heard from me sooner. I was much shocked by your news. Though I never met your father, I had always hoped to do so some day, and have often regretted the circumstances of distance and of time which led to the dying away of the correspondence between these two branches of the family. My father, even in his latter days, frequently alluded to his "unknown Austrian nephew." It was kind of you to think of me at this moment, and I trust that this renewed correspondence, even though it has had a sad cause for its starting point, will not die away as entirely as the old one.

'To begin with, you might tell me about yourself. Your father's death must have left you very lonely, unless indeed you are staying with his relations, for I believe that you have no lack of Austrian uncles and aunts. I do not know the name of the place from which your note is dated, but, if my memory serves me right, it is not that of the Eldringen family seat. Surely you are not alone? In any case do not forget that you have an English cousin who

would be very happy to assist you in any way that lies in his power.

Yours very sincerely,

'GILBERT NEVYLL.'

Ulrica was surprised and somewhat indignant with herself when, having finished the perusal of this letter, she discovered that there was a lump in her throat. Even after the first three words she had paused with a strange thrill, repeating them over and over again to herself, as though to convince herself of their reality. 'My dear cousin.' It was the first time that she had ever been addressed in this way. She had cousins enough, but not one who cared to claim the relationship, or whose claims, on the other hand, she herself would have cared to admit. The words of this unknown Englishman were the first words of condolence which she had heard on the death of her father, for Countess Minart's frosty phrases were not to be counted as such; his letter was the first sign of sympathy which she had received in her loneliness. The experience was so new and unprecedented as to be almost startling. In the middle of the village street, as she now was, half-way between the house out of which she had been virtually turned and the other house into which she had no reason to suppose that she would be received, it struck her almost as something incredible that, in the whole wide world, there should exist any one who could think it worth while to ask that question: 'Surely you are not alone?' And yet, though she never for one moment contemplated the course of making use of that overwhelming offer of assistance, there was something comforting in the mere fact of its having been made. And he spoke almost as though he meant what he said. What a strange man he must be! How totally distinct from all Minarts and Tiefenthals that ever lived and breathed! Why did he not look down on her as they did? Why did he not consider it a letting-down of his dignity to enter into a correspondence with the daughter of Fanny Badl? Perhaps he had forgotten the circumstances of her father's marriage, perhaps even he had never been properly informed; considering the scanty intercourse which had been kept up between the Austrian and the English

branches of the family during the last thirty years, this ignorance was quite conceivable.

The lump in Ulrica's throat had quite melted by this time; it was almost angrily that she pushed back the letter into the envelope. Her pride, accustomed as it had become by circumstances to stand ever armed to the teeth, had cast suspiciously about for an explanation of the writer's frank and friendly tone, and she believed now that she had hit upon this explanation.

'I shall write to him to-day,' said Ulrica, with a hard smile. 'He wants to know all about me, oh yes, he shall have all the information he wants. I shall give him my mother's pedigree very distinctly; we shall see then whether he still remains as anxious to keep up the correspondence with his "dear cousin."''

It was not until late that evening, at the end of a busy day, that Ulrica was able to carry this resolution into effect. The landlady's surmise had proved correct and, for a week or two, or until the summer wardrobe of the two Fräuleins Pfanner had been got into order, Ulrica had once more secured a roof over her head. The Fräuleins Pfanner themselves were a couple of freckled and meagre damsels, and the specimens of the summer wardrobe at present under operation were some alarmingly sky-blue garments decorated with such a profusion of ribbon-loops that the sisters had felt unable to cope with them unaided.

'Thanks for your letter,' Ulrica wrote, 'but it would not be fair to let you compromise yourself by a correspondence with me, without making you quite aware of who your correspondent is. Do you know that my mother was a sergeant's daughter? A common sergeant, do you understand? Not a gentleman, and naturally she was not a lady. This is a crime which, as I understand, can never be condoned; my Austrian uncles and aunts have taught me this. No, this is not the "family seat;" the family seat was passed over my father's head to a cousin, my father having forfeited all right to it by his marriage. I have never seen the "family seat," and I don't suppose I should be allowed within a hundred miles of it. This is a village

in the mountains in which my father died while we were on our usual travels, and in which I am attempting to earn money enough to be able to go to Vienna. You see, therefore, that to the crime of having a sergeant for a grandfather I add the crime of being poor. You had better think twice before showing any further interest in such a questionable person as I am.'

It had been a necessity to Ulrica to get this explanation off her mind, and the fingers with which she stitched away at the sky-blue garments next day were all the steadier for the relief which the despatching of the letter brought her. Sympathy was pleasant, but she would not have it upon false pretences.

The whole remainder of that week was filled to overflowing with the billows and the flounces of those sky-blue dresses. Ulrica sat smothered in sky-blue from morning till night, listening through the whirr of the sewing-machine at her side to the conversation of the two freckled sisters; which chiefly consisted in surmises as to whether the dresses would be ready to wear on Sunday, whether the weather would be suitable for the inauguration, and whether August and Leopold would be there to admire them. Ulrica gathered that August and Leopold were two youthful tradesmen, who not unfrequently came over from the small town which lay out on the plain, in order to spend their Sunday afternoon in wandering with the Fräuleins Pfanner under the pine trees of the valley.

The mention of their names was generally accompanied by a giggle and by a good deal of sisterly and playful bantering, as to the results to be expected from the burst of sky-blue. One of the Fräuleins Pfanner was of opinion that the rose-coloured toilettes, which were to be taken in hand next week, would prove an even more powerful means of subjugation. Whether this was actually the case or not, Ulrica never had the means of ascertaining, for before the dawn of that week, which was to have been as deeply steeped in rose-colour as the last had been in sky-blue, the Fräuleins Pfanner had suddenly discovered that her services were no longer required.

It was on their return from the usual Sunday walk in the forest that the two freckled sisters had made this discovery. The day had not been a success; the weather was indeed cloudless, and the final stitches had been triumphantly put into the new dresses shortly before midnight on the Saturday; but what was the good of taking walks in pine-forests with young tradesmen whose prospects were ever so excellent, if the conversation was as unsatisfactory as it had been this afternoon?

Questioned by her elder sister, the younger Fräulein Pfanner reluctantly confessed that Leopold had poisoned the Sunday stillness of the forest, as well as the peace of Fräulein Pfanner's soul, by the innumerable questions with which he plied her as to the tall girl in the black dress of whom he had caught a glimpse on the staircase of the school-house. Of August, the elder Fräulein Pfanner had an even worse account to give, that enterprising young grocer having contrived not only to catch a glimpse, but even to enter into conversation with the stranger. It was at the conclusion of these confessions that the two sisters exchanged a glance of understanding, and agreed that they were quite able to finish the rose-coloured dresses without Ulrica's aid.

Ulrica accepted her discharge without a word; she was beginning to get blunted to these shiftings of fate. Seeing no other help for it, she paid a visit to the inn and consulted the landlady as to what her next step should be. She had a certain confidence in the landlady's practical turn of mind, and she was aware, besides, that the anxiety to help her out of Franzl's way would probably inflame Franzl's mother with the desire to dispose of her elsewhere with the least possible delay. In this she had once more calculated rightly, but the difficulties in the way of discovering a new employment for Ulrica were this time considerable. The landlady indeed put on her shawl with alacrity, and spent pretty nearly the whole of that day in tramping round the village with her charge, warmly recommending her to all among her acquaintances whom she judged to be possibly in need of an extra pair of hands in the kitchen or in the bake-house, but it was not until late

that evening that Ulrica found herself installed in a farmhouse, tenanted only by an old well-to-do peasant couple, for whom she engaged herself to cook, the wife being partially paralysed and unable to move from her chair.

It was with a sigh of relief that she laid her head on her pillow that night. Surely here she would be able to enjoy peace for a little and to ward off starvation, even if nothing else were reached. The old couple were childless, there were no sons to fall in love with her, no daughters to be jealous of her, she foresaw no difficulty on any side. Her courage rose again, and with it her confidence in the future.

And yet it was only four days later that she stood again in the street, without a roof over her head. How had it come about? In a very simple way, in a way she had foreseen from the very morning after her arrival, when she had caught the hideous, leering gaze of the old peasant fixed greedily upon her face. He had not had a proper view of the new 'house-girl' on the previous evening, for his eyes were weak and blear, neither had Ulrica had a proper view of her new master. She had seen that his hair was white and his shoulders bent, and in the dusk of the summer evening she had therefore concluded that he was a harmless old peasant. Daylight showed her that this old peasant might have sat for the picture of a white-haired satyr. There had followed several days, during which she had hoped by stern attention to her work to crush all attempts at the would-be playful but distressingly bucolic familiarity which her employer began to display towards her, and then had come a moment, when, despite all her care, the old man had contrived to surprise her out of sight of his wife, had jocularly reproached her with her prudishness, and had attempted to snatch a kiss. In the next instant he found himself tottering back against the wall, and by the time he recovered himself the 'house-girl' was gone, not only out of the wood-shed into which he had followed her, but out of the yard and out of the house altogether; nor did she ever come back, not even to sleep that night, though it was some time after sunset that matters had thus come to a crisis.

As Ulrica stood bare-headed in the dusky village street, she was panting for breath. A strong disgust shook her from head to foot; she was once more homeless, and the night-shadows were fast closing in, but she felt that it would be easier to spend the night out here in the street, in the forest, anywhere, rather than put her foot again within the house from which she had just fled. Mechanically she turned her steps the same way she had turned them on the morning when she had first made acquaintance with the village,—towards the forest.

It was scarcely darker in the forest than it had been in the sleeping village, although the moon had not yet risen; nor was Ulrica afraid of darkness. Something like despair was beginning to settle down upon her, and the black forest suited the black mood.

She did not sleep that night, but wandered for hours among the pine trees, not knowing and not caring what was to become of her, aware only by the striking of the church clock in the valley that the night was slowly wearing towards morning. Her heart was hot and rebellious; what had she done that she should be thus hunted from spot to spot? Was there no place in the world where she could find rest? It was not comfort she asked for, not kindness, she was willing to work and to suffer alone; why could she not be allowed to do so? Since so much had been withheld from her, why had not more been withheld? Why had those two fatal gifts, her beauty and her coronet, been flung to her? Her beauty, which exposed her to a thousand dangers, her coronet, which was no more than a stumbling-block in her path, a leaden weight chained to her foot and which she must needs drag with her whichever way she turned, a fool's cap with which the mockery of Fate had crowned her, and whose teasing bells jingled derisively in her ear.

'If I were plain as well as poor, it would be much easier to earn my bread,' she reflected. 'But I know that I am not plain, and I am afraid that my looks are of a sort which it will take a great many years of misery to wear out. Girls with no money have no right to be beautiful; my eyes should be small, and my cheeks sallow, and my

shoulders narrow, then perhaps there might be a chance for me in the world.'

Ulrica was under the impression that she had wandered far into the forest, but dawn, to her surprise, showed her the village at her feet. She was now sitting upon a block of stone, faint with hunger and sleeplessness, and yet having formed no plan of where she was to spend the day, which was bursting in rosy splendour over the hills. A narrow footpath wound in and out of the pine trees, and somewhere just out of sight the river was gurgling and splashing. Presently Ulrica's head sank back against the broad stem beside her, and she fell into an exhausted sleep.

She awoke with a start, not aware of having heard any sound, but feeling instinctively that she was no longer alone. On the path, straight opposite to the block of stone on which she sat, an old man stood, holding a book which he had closed over his finger, and was regarding her with a mixture of deep pity and perplexed surprise.

Ulrica recognised the old priest who had buried her father, and had been one of the witnesses in whose presence the notary had broken the seals of her father's possessions. She had seen Pater Sepp, as he was generally called, more than once since then, in the church and in the street, but had never again spoken to him. She looked at him now indifferently, not rising from her stone.

'Do you know that your hair is quite wet with the dew, my child,' said the old priest in a voice of mild agitation, 'and that your hands are scratched with thorns? You must have sat here for a long time.'

'No, only since about midnight,' answered Ulrica, looking at him with fierce grey eyes.

'Since midnight? All by yourself? Good God! Why were you not in your bed?'

'I haven't got any bed.'

The old priest looked more and more perplexed.

'But have you done this often before? I mean, where did you spend the other nights?'

'In a house.'

'But why—'

‘Why am I not there now? Because an old man insulted me, a man with hair as white as yours,’ added Ulrica, with a sort of grim satisfaction at the increasing horror on Pater Sepp’s face. ‘He followed me into the wood-shed before supper, and tried to kiss me.’

Pater Sepp’s questions irritated her; she wished he would leave her in peace, and she thought to shock him by the recklessness of her words would be the easiest way to rid herself of him.

And shocked he certainly was, though not in the way she had expected.

‘Before supper!’ he repeated in horror-stricken tones. ‘And you have been out ever since—*without your supper?* My poor child, this is terrible! It would not have been nearly so bad if—’

‘If he had waited until after supper?’ finished Ulrica, and burst into a helpless laugh; she was too weak to resist the impulse.

‘You may laugh, my child, for you are young, but there is nothing so terrible as hunger, it is the only real misfortune in the world—hunger and thirst, I have known them myself. Oh, why did you not come to me?’

‘To you? Why should I have come to you?’ she replied brusquely. ‘What are you to me? What right have you to ask me questions or to stand here and pity me, when I never asked for pity? No one has any right to pity me. I wish you would leave me alone.’

‘I will leave you alone if you wish,’ said the old priest humbly, ‘but I cannot bear the idea of your being hungry; I was wondering whether I had anything to give you.’

He was fumbling as he spoke in the pocket of his thread-bare *soutane*.

‘He is going to give me money,’ thought Ulrica, setting her teeth; ‘have I come to this?’

But it was not money which he presently drew forth, it was a thick slice of black bread which he held timidly towards Ulrica. She dashed it aside so vehemently that it fell from his hand to the ground.

‘I told you once before that I am not a beggar to be offered alms,’ she said, with flaming cheek. ‘Keep that

piece of bread for the next cripple that you meet by the roadside.'

'It was not for beggars that I brought the bread with me, there are never any beggars in the wood; it was for the birds, the chaffinches and the thrushes; they generally follow me as I say my breviary, and I like to feed them.'

The old man as he spoke had stooped to pick the bread from the ground, and was now carefully and patiently removing the particles of earth and the dry fir-needles which clung to it.

'Am I a chaffinch or a thrush, I wonder?' Ulrica asked herself, wavering once more on the verge of over-excited laughter.

In spite of herself the bitterness was melting within her; under the irresistible influence of this simple-hearted sympathy the hardness about her heart was beginning to soften a little. Presently, too, as she sat still on her stone, watching the old man's manipulations with the bread, it began to become clear to her that in truth she was suffering the keenest pangs of hunger. Until she had seen the bread she had not known how hungry she was, but now she could almost have sprung from her seat and torn it from the old priest's hand. She was not aware of it, but the gaze she had fixed upon the bread betrayed all this. The priest, raising his eyes at the end of his operations and meeting that hungry look, instinctively held out the crust again. Ulrica hesitated, glanced into his face, looked back at the bread, and then put out her hand for it. There was not a word said, but the old priest had conquered. She ate the bread eagerly, he watching her the while with intense satisfaction. At the end she drew a long breath.

'I feel better now, I think I could sleep again,' and she leant her head once more against the stem behind her.

'But not here, surely; you must not sleep out here.'

'I have told you that I have no place to go to.'

'Come with me, I will give you a place. There is plenty of room in the *Pfarrhof*. You trust me, do you not?'

'I trust nobody,' said Ulrica, still sullenly, but she was beginning to waver. When Pater Sepp said again, 'Come

with me,' she rose from her stone heavily and slowly, and without a word allowed him to take her by the hand and to lead her back towards the village as though she had been a child.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MARIENHOF.

DOWN the entire length of the village street, Ulrica was led by Pater Sepp, past the inn, past the churchyard, past the church, and up a narrow lane. She walked in a sort of stupor, not observing where she was until a gate fell shut behind her. Then she raised her head. They had entered a shady space, shut off apparently from the surrounding lanes and meadows by a high but crumbling wall. On one side stood a house which might have been a freshly painted toy taken out of a box, so white were the walls, so brightly green the shutters. Above the open door the figure of the Virgin was daubed in blue and red upon the whitewash. The neat and compact little building stood upon a neat and compact square, which, being sanded with river sand and carefully raked, formed a symmetrical and unbroken pale yellow border to the toy house. But outside the edge of this sanded strip all symmetry ceased; even the grass that touched it grew wild and at its will. The rest of this little enclosed domain was an orchard, which at the same time was partly garden and partly yard, for some rustic out-buildings and a primitive pump spouting its water into a wooden trough were to be seen from between the fruit trees, while to the right a confused blaze of flowers flashed through the staves of a paling, and spread itself up to the walls of a second house, dimly to be distinguished in the background. It was to the neat white house that the old priest led the way, making a slight *détour* in order not to disturb a grey cat who was lapping a saucer of milk set out upon the sanded path, and a little further

on stooping to give an encouraging pat to a starved-looking dog hungrily gnawing a bone. Sparrows were picking up crumbs on the threshold, and altogether it seemed that breakfast had been laid out here for every sort of living creature. An old woman was summoned, and Ulrica, rendered passive by extreme fatigue, suffered herself to be conducted to a small whitewashed room, and presently was lying sound asleep upon the 'guest-bed' of the Pfarrhof.

It was past midday before she awoke. Pater Sepp had finished his frugal meal, but had taken care to have an ample supply of soup, boiled beef, and vegetables kept warm for his guest. He sat opposite to her while she ate them, and rubbed his hands delightedly at every mouthful she swallowed. Ulrica had given up attempting to harden her heart against him, and after a time, very much to her own surprise, she found herself talking to him about her father, about her poverty, and about how she had no idea where she was to sleep that night. At this Pater Sepp rubbed his hands a little harder.

'But I have thought of that,' he said eagerly; 'it came into my head while you were asleep, and I could scarcely wait until you awoke in order to tell you. You can sleep in the *Marienhof*, that is the second house, you know, over on the other side; it is quite empty now, and there are several rooms. You can sleep there for many nights.'

When Ulrica had done eating, Pater Sepp fetched a big rusty key and led the way across the orchard to the Marienhof, of which she had as yet only caught a glimpse between the trees. As they walked towards it, he explained to her that the older house had originally been the only house here, but that his predecessor, who had apparently been of a speculative turn of mind, had persuaded the bishop to have a new house built for the priest to live in, the original Pfarrhof being turned into a species of dairy establishment which the Pfarrer had a right either to work on his own account, or to lease to any honest and God-fearing inhabitant of the village whose mode of life made him appear worthy of being installed upon this quasi-sacred ground, something on the principle of a 'prize of virtue,' like the

Rosaire of France or the Pope's Golden Rose. The speculative predecessor had pursued the first of these plans, and there was a legend to the effect that never had there been such sleek, plump cows, nor such thick cream, nor such delicious butter as in the time of the enterprising Pater Martin. The souls of the parishioners may possibly not have been quite so well looked after as the cows; on this point the legend was silent, but it was very positive as to the fact of Pater Martin having lived a much more luxurious life than that of most village priests, and of his having died bequeathing a comfortable little fortune to the young niece who had kept house for him. In stepping into his shoes Pater Sepp had not stepped in his footsteps, that is to say, he had, after a brief but ineffectual struggle to bring the claims of the parishioners' souls and the cows into harmony with each other, abandoned the attempt to work the dairy himself, and handed over the concern to one of the most deserving of the aforementioned parishioners. A deserving parishioner is, however, not always necessarily a successful dairyman, and men who are selected for the piety of their demeanour are not invariably to be counted on for the judicious management of a cow-byre. It did not prove so, at any rate in this case, nor in several other subsequent cases, for the years that followed saw the lease of the Marienhof pass from one pair of unskilful hands into another, and the Marienhof itself, by dint of a long course of failures, sank so low in the public estimation that even the most God-fearing of the villagers began to fight shy of the prize of virtue. The end had been the complete bankruptcy of the last of the virtuous dairymen, and for nearly two years past the Marienhof had been untenanted, the byres empty, and even the grass on the stretch of meadowland which belonged to the establishment uncropped, or only cropped promiscuously by the various cows of the village.

Something of all this Pater Sepp told Ulrica as they crossed the orchard together. The path on which they walked was all but grass-grown, the fruit trees around them had shed their blossoms some little time back and their thickly set branches gave rich hopes for the autumn, but it

was evident that no watchful eye and no tending hand had been near them for long. They stood knee-deep in the long, waving grass, broken branches had been left to wither where they fell, yellow toadstools had been allowed to gather on the stems. The bright patch of flowers of which Ulrica had caught a glimpse as she entered showed itself to be the wreck of a once gay garden, at the back of which stood a long rambling farmhouse with deep overhanging eaves, and a rudely carved wooden balcony, blackened with time, running round its three sides. This was the Marienhof.

'The last tenant used to supply me with all the flowers I needed in the church,' explained Pater Sepp, as he pushed open the low garden-gate which hung on one rusty hinge. Even now a certain amount of material for altar decoration might have been found within the wildly gay square which ran the entire length of the farmhouse front.

'Ah! the High Altar used to be worth looking at at Pentecost,' said Pater Sepp, with a little regretful sigh, as he indicated a part of the garden which had evidently been exclusively devoted to the cultivation of peonies, the 'Pentecost roses' so dear to the Austrian peasant's heart. The great round clumps were now hard pressed by giant nettles; one single bush, a little apart, with its red petals shed around it, stood as though in a pool of blood.

'And what lilies we used to have for the Virgin's altar!' said Pater Sepp, still regretfully.

The wrecks of the lily bed were visible still, but of the few white emblems of purity which had struggled into a neglected life there was scarcely one which had not been dragged earthward by the weight of twining white convolvuli. By a curious whim of nature the 'lily corner' had thus remained as spotless in appearance as in the days when it had furnished bunches for the vases on the Virgin's altar. The spot, in fact, was of a dazzling whiteness, white not only with the half-strangled lilies and the riotous convolvuli, but white also at this moment with countless butterflies softly swaying above the mass of flowers in the afternoon sunshine. It was not even always easy to distinguish which were the flowers and which the butterflies,

for among the blossoms there were some that sat so lightly on their stems that they might almost have been butterflies, while among the butterflies many hung so motionless that they appeared to be all but flowers.

The house bore upon it the same stamp as did the garden and the orchard, the stamp of good material lying waste, of neglected opportunities and of a wealth of comfort which waited only to be claimed. There were the traces of a once gaudy Madonna—the ghost, it almost seemed, of that upon the newer house—still faintly showing above the door. Round one corner of the house a crazy old pear tree clung, clasping it in an obstinate embrace and making a pretence of supporting the balcony upon its gnarled and twisted old branches.

As Pater Sepp turned the rusty key in the keyhole, the sound echoed within the empty house, and from the dark recesses of the balcony above some birds darted out, startled by this unwonted intrusion. The room within was dark, except for the shafts of sunshine which slipped in through the heart-shaped openings in the wooden shutters. Pater Sepp groped his way forward and threw back one of the shutters; the light which burst in showed an empty room, with a low rafter ceiling and a worm-eaten board floor. Leaning out by the open window, Ulrica found herself looking out straight across the road and towards the river which flowed beyond. By the foot-bridge and the crucifix straight opposite and the low green bank which swelled up almost within touch of her hand, she recognised that the house she was in was that same old farmhouse so quaintly built into its own orchard wall which she had noticed on the morning of her first inspection of the village.

There was a goodly array of rooms in the old house, all with solid rafter ceilings and huge blue or green stoves blocking an entire corner. All were empty, except for some rickety tables or three-legged chairs which had evidently not been considered worth the trouble of moving. Deserted spider-webs, the wings of long-dead victims still quivering in their meshes, hung across many of the corners.

‘You wouldn’t be frightened to sleep here alone?’ asked Pater Sepp a little later. ‘A bed can easily be carried

over; you can't sleep in the Pfarrhof because it is against the rule. Do you think this house will do for to-night?'

'Yes,' said Ulrica, somewhat absently. They had made the round of the whole little enclosed domain, they had passed by the spouting pump and looked into the empty cow-byres, where the nettles grew quite luxuriantly out of the earthen floor. Ulrica was now sitting on a dilapidated bench beside the doorway of the farmhouse, and as she looked around her a strange unaccustomed feeling of peace began to lay itself upon her troubled spirit. The butterflies had left the convolvuli by this time, and the convolvuli themselves had tightly twisted up their blossoms for the night. The slanting rays of the setting sun, shooting over the orchard wall, tipped the moss-grown branches of the fruit trees with gold.

'I think this place could be made very beautiful,' said Ulrica, almost dreamily, 'there seems so much to be done. I think one could be very happy here.'

Later on in the evening, she startled the old priest by a sudden question:

'How much does a cow cost?' she asked abruptly.

'Between forty and fifty florins,' answered Pater Sepp in amazement. 'But, my dear child, are you thinking of buying a cow?'

'No,' said Ulrica, with a short laugh, 'but I was thinking what a pity it is that I am not a virtuous peasant with money enough to lease the farm.'

'But they have all left the place beggars, my dear.'

'That can only be because they were bunglers; probably they worked too much with their hands and too little with their brains. I am certain I could make a good thing out of it.'

'Then it is a great pity that you are not a peasant,' said Pater Sepp, much distressed.

Early next morning, when Ulrica stepped out of the old house, she perceived the priest advancing eagerly towards her, up the weed-grown garden-walk.

'I have been thinking of it half the night,' he broke out, even before he had reached her. 'I have looked at it from every side, and I don't see why it need matter.'

‘Why what need matter?’

‘Your not being a peasant. If you really think you could make the Marienhof pay, why should you not try the experiment? You have told me already that you have no other place to go to.’

Ulrica was silent for a minute in absolute surprise.

‘My not being a peasant might not matter so much, but how about my not being a man?’

‘I take that responsibility upon myself,’ answered the old priest, not without a certain dignity.

‘And the money? Have you thought of that trifle? Where is the money to come from to set the thing agoing?’

Pater Sepp had thought of the money, though he had come to no very positive conclusion. He had thought of returning to the system adopted by his predecessor, and, for a time at least, working the dairy on his own account through the medium of Ulrica: that is, until Ulrica had gained sufficient ground to take the lease of it herself.

Ulrica very quickly caught at the idea. The rest of that day was devoted to calculation and discussion, and before a week had passed Ulrica was definitely established at the Marienhof. It had been agreed that the dairy was to be started on the smallest possible scale, to be increased only in measure as it promised to be successful. No more than four cows stood in the byre, though there was room there for twenty, and one milkmaid represented, as yet, the entire serving establishment. In return for her superintendence of the dairy Ulrica received the free use of the house and a certain percentage of the profits.

On the same day that the final agreement was come to, Ulrica walked up the village street and spent most of her few remaining florins in the village shop. She came back carrying a large parcel of black woollen stuffs, another of white linen, and a third which contained a square black silk handkerchief, such as the peasant women of the country wore. During several nights she slept little, but sat up stitching away by the light of one candle. A few days later Pater Sepp, coming out of his house in the morning, was surprised to see a tall young peasant woman, whom he did not recognise as one of his parishioners, working away

in the garden of the Marienhof. When he got a little nearer he saw that this was Ulrica. Except for the absence of the smallest touch of colour, she was equipped from head to foot like any other woman in the village.

'Since I am to do a peasant's work, I may as well wear a peasant's dress,' she explained to Pater Sepp. 'I feel safer dressed in this way, I shall be less conspicuous. I *am* a peasant now, you know.'

'Ye-es, I suppose so,' said Pater Sepp, looking at her somewhat doubtfully.

Ulrica spoke in perfect good faith. In donning the plain black skirt and bodice, the homely white sleeves and clumsy shoes of the district, she had honestly meant to amalgamate herself with her surroundings. She had intended the quaint yet ungainly costume to act as a disguise to that inconvenient beauty for which she saw no reason to be thankful to Fate. She had hoped to conceal her shapely waist under the shapeless bodice, to counteract grace and agility by the graceless volume of her full skirts; she had hidden away her wealth of hair, compressing it into the tightest of plaits, and forcing its rebellious waves to lie smooth under the black silk handkerchief which was drawn over her white forehead with an almost nunlike austerity. Her dress was a stern reality, bearing no relationship to those pretty caricatures which are to be seen at every fancy ball; and yet, for all that, and despite his inexperience, which was as that of a child, Pater Sepp's 'Ye-es' given in answer to Ulrica's triumphant assertion sounded very doubtful indeed. Perhaps he dimly felt that black serge and white linen alone are not enough to make a real peasant.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIRST HUNDRED FLORINS.

A YEAR and more had passed since the day on which Ulrica, in knotting that black silk handkerchief round her

head, had thought to cut herself off forever from all the world that was not Glockenau.

Summer had come again, and Ulrica was once more at work in the garden of the Marienhof, no longer the untidy, weed-grown square it had been when she first set foot within it, but a well-cared-for array of gay beds, a perfect treasure-house of 'church decorations,' enough to delight the heart of Pater Sepp and to fill the vases on his altars to overflowing. Never in the days of the most virtuous of the dairymen had there been such a mass of peonies at Pentecost, nor such basketsful of rose-leaves at Corpus Christi, while in June the resuscitated lily corner had been a sight to see.

The change in the garden was but one feature in the change which pervaded the whole Marienhof. The orchard had a certain well-to-do appearance which this time last year it had entirely lacked, heavily-laden branches had been propped, dead trees had been removed. The gate had two whole hinges now, instead of one broken one, the missing staves of the paling had been replaced. A curl of smoke rose from the chimney of the house; there were no more broken panes in the windows, nor dusty spider-webs in the corners. The path which led from the house to the cow-byre had been once more trodden into existence, and in the cow-byre, now innocent of nettles and redolent with fresh hay, there presently will be standing the ten plump and well-cared-for cows that now form the stock of the establishment and that are at this moment still cropping the grass on the Marienhof pasture down by the river-side.

And all this change was Ulrica's work. It had been a hard struggle, but the dairy had proved a complete success, a success which promised in time to eclipse even the memory of the palmiest days of Pater Martin. After a little more than a year, Ulrica began to see the day within reach on which she would be able to become the real mistress of the Marienhof. Already she had made the first step in that direction by purchasing as her own property nearly half of the cows which formed the stock of the establishment.

Despite the constant wear and tear of hard work, it had

been the happiest year of Ulrica's life. At last she had found a spot on which to rest, at last she had gained an outlet for her energies. She had also found a protector, and one to whom she had attached herself with all that fund of affection which had lain unclaimed since her father's death. That Pater Sepp was no more than a peasant in a *soutane* Ulrica had very soon discovered, but she had simultaneously felt that an ignorance so innocent and a charity so boundless made cultivation appear as something absolutely superfluous. It was physical suffering which almost exclusively called forth the expression of this charity. Mental anguish was a thing which had never crossed Pater Sepp's unchequered existence, and with which, therefore, he was somewhat puzzled how to deal; but hunger and thirst were palpable, he had felt them himself in his youth, these therefore he could measure and sound by the light of his past experience. So bitter had this experience been—for Pater Sepp's father had been but a poor labourer—that to this day the old priest could not bear to see as much as a dog or a sparrow go hungry from his door, let alone a human being. The ever-replenished saucer of milk and the perpetual bone to be found beside his doorstep were results of his susceptibility on this point. Even to the mouse-holes in the kitchen, morsels of cheese which had certainly not been put there by the grumbling old housekeeper had a knack of finding their way. If Pater Sepp had not felt too deeply for the flies, it is probable that the very spiders that spun their webs across the wooden trellis against the house-wall would have had their breakfast provided for them. 'To feed the hungry' was evidently the mission for which Pater Sepp had been sent into this world. He aspired to no higher. To settle a religious scruple was a responsibility which the humble-minded old priest would never have taken upon himself. Religious scruples were things he did not know. For him the world was divided into people who had enough to eat and people who had not enough to eat, and as long as he starved himself in order to keep others from starving his conscience made him no reproach. His own priesthood awed him so deeply that though it was close upon fifty

years now since he had said his first Mass, he had never quite recovered from the surprise of finding himself raised to such dignity. There was not one of Pater Sepp's parishioners who could remember having received from him any more intricate counsel than that of trusting in Providence, and confidently counting that Providence would cause everything to come right 'somehow,' and yet every person who was in trouble came straight to Pater Sepp—not for advice, but in order to be patted on the back by the feeble old hand and to read true sympathy in the faded blue eyes, and to go away comforted if not enlightened. For half a century he had thus dispensed bread and consolation, leading a life which was as open and as clear and as easy to read to its depth as that crystal river over the road, through whose waters every pebble was to be seen as distinctly as though no water were there.

It was not long before Ulrica's protector began to feel a certain awe of the young woman whom he had undertaken to protect. Hitherto no one had ever interfered with his voluntary starvations, which he disguised under the title of 'extra fasts,' nor with his inveterate habit of barefacedly over-paying every workman who so much as put in a nail to the trellis on the Pfarrhof wall. He had always been at liberty to go supperless to bed as often as a stray beggar turned up at the door, but after Ulrica's installation in the Marienhof it seemed that all this was to be otherwise. From the day on which she had found the foolish old priest sitting in his ice-cold room with blue lips and chattering teeth, having given away his last piece of firewood to a troop of gypsies who had passed that way, Ulrica had felt it her duty to exercise a stern control over his unwarranted liberality.

'Have you given away your coat as well?' she asked when she found him thus upon that bitter December afternoon, for Pater Sepp was sitting in his shirt-sleeves. But to her surprise she caught sight of the coat hanging on the chair beside him. And then Pater Sepp somewhat shamefacedly explained. Finding that he was growing intolerably chilled sitting in the unheated room, it had occurred to him that by taking off his coat for ten minutes at a time,

and thus chilling himself by a few further degrees, he could produce a species of artificial reaction which would make him feel quite warm by comparison, for at least five minutes, every time he resumed his upper garment. It was an invention of his own, and he had been rather proud of it; but cowed by Ulrica's peremptory tone, he meekly slipped back into his coat, and from that moment forward her dominion over him was secure.

It followed almost unavoidably that by interfering with Pater Sepp's suicidal system of charity, Ulrica became herself mixed up with these same charities. In order to be able the better to control the old priest's movements, she constituted herself into his representative and adjutant, and very soon there was not a house in the village under whose roof poverty dwelt that was not familiar with the tall figure of the 'Grafin'—for the 'Grafin' she remained, despite her peasant's dress—a basket of provisions on her arm, stealing a moment of her own busy day in order to administer some urgently required relief. Ulrica had in a high degree that keen sympathy which the poor generally feel towards the poor. Something, too, of a rebellious instinct may have served to deepen her interest in the work. These people had been ill-used by the same blind fate which had done its best to wreck her life; they stood on the same side of the battle, she would help them to fight their destiny with all the means at her command.

And thus Ulrica had found not only a resting-place, but also a mission. Her installation in the Marienhof had caused no small excitement in its time, but the 'Gräfin' had long since come to be accepted as a fact. From the moment that she had placed herself under Pater Sepp's protection her position had been secured, and to some it even became difficult to imagine the village without her.

The only communication which during this past year Ulrica had kept up with the outer world was a series of letters which she had exchanged with her English relation Sir Gilbert Nevyl. The first of these, an answer to the defiant information concerning her mother's parentage which she had hurled at his head, had been written in a

tone of considerable amusement. He did not appear crushed by the news she gave him.

‘I can assure you,’ he wrote, in his easy, flowing hand, ‘that your opening phrase with the threatened disclosure as to “who my correspondent is” made me feel exceedingly uncomfortable. If your mother had been the daughter of a convicted forger you could not possibly have more considerately prepared my mind. I am very much interested to hear that your grandfather was a sergeant. I have always believed that a great deal of the honour of an army depends upon its sergeants. I hope there wasn’t anything wrong about this particular sergeant? as your tone almost seems to imply. He didn’t run away in a battle, did he?’

A little further on he adopted a more serious tone. The contents of Ulrica’s letter had taken him completely by surprise, and so shocked was he by the idea of her forlorn position, that, writing upon the impulse of the moment, he had not scrupled in the most straightforward of terms, and upon the strength of their relationship, to offer her pecuniary assistance. This well-meant but ill-advised idea had once more aroused Ulrica to wrath against her unknown cousin. She angrily questioned her memory as to the exact contents of that letter written so hastily by the light of the school-house candle, and her cheeks burnt with vexation as she told herself that the account of her penniless condition, which she had intended solely as a stern tribute to truth, had, to the eyes of the wealthy Sir Gilbert Nevyll, very possibly looked like a disguised demand for money. This, of course, was not to be borne, and the offer was rejected by return of post, in terms that were more distinct than strictly civil.

‘I require no assistance and will accept of no assistance,’ wrote Ulrica. ‘Thank Heaven, I am strong enough to take care of myself. Why is it that rich people consider themselves at liberty to insult poor people without provocation? Or is it possible, *can* it be possible that you thought I was begging?’

The answer to this second letter of Ulrica's was not long in coming, and again there was a suggestion of amusement to be read between the lines.

'Austrian pride seems to be a most inflammable article,' the letter ran. 'With regard to that accusation of a desire to insult, my conscience feels quite easy. It merely occurred to me that, since your Austrian relations seem to have abandoned you in the most shameful manner, it naturally became my business to look after you. Of course, after the snub you have given me, I daren't insist upon this point; but if you ever are in what we in England call a "fix," will you promise to let me help you? I feel that I am very bold in making this request, but if you knew what it feels like to be a useless member of society, you would make allowances for a poor fellow who snatches at the chance of keeping more useful people alive.'

This had the effect of making Ulrica feel somewhat ashamed of her vehemence, and after this, though the promise was not given, and the request in fact carefully ignored, the correspondence assumed a calmer character. 'Don't you think that we might now conclude in peace?' Sir Gilbert had written, and peace accordingly had been concluded.

The letters that passed between them were not frequent, one perhaps in every month or two, but by degrees they came to be landmarks in Ulrica's lonely life. She looked forward with an interest ever on the increase to the days which would bring her the letter with the well-known lilac stamp. She had very soon divined that the writer of those letters was not a happy man, though he seldom spoke of himself, never referring to his personal circumstances, and generally confining himself to inquiries concerning the progress of the dairy and Ulrica's general mode of life.

'Tell me as much as you like about your cows and your hens and your garden,' he wrote more than once; 'to a lonely fellow such as I am, your letters are all interesting.'

That reference to the 'useless member of society' had not been the only betrayal of self-dissatisfaction which had

escaped him. 'How I envy you your work,' he wrote on one occasion. 'When I was very young and foolish it used to be the dream of my life to earn my own bread. I am old and wise now, and yet faint visions of that dream still haunt me occasionally. There is no saying whether I may not yet take to potato-digging in my old age.'

'Poor old man,' had been Ulrica's reflection, 'I suppose he is what they call *blasé*. Very likely he is gouty, I have heard that rich people very often become gouty, and, of course, that must spoil one's enjoyment of life. If he feels his loneliness so much, I wonder why he hasn't married? Old bachelors are so apt to become crusty.'

As Sir Gilbert was her father's cousin, and therefore belonged to an older generation than herself, Ulrica never thought of him otherwise than as an elderly gentleman.

'Yes, it had been a happy year,' Ulrica said to herself, as she watered her garden upon the August evening where we again find her at work.

The long rows of flowers on both sides of her stood motionless, for there was no breath of air stirring; here and there only some aster or carnation which a bee had just left was still trembling on its stalk, and would tremble for a minute until the agitation was spent and it settled down again into the immobility of its companions.

It was a great day for Ulrica, for on that morning she had despatched the first hardly earned hundred florins to the most urgent of her father's creditors. It was her first triumph over Fate, and everything around her spoke of the same triumph; the trees bent under the weight of the fruit, at the roots of every bush cocks and hens were busily pecking, and presently, through the open gate, there came the procession of ten cows returning from the meadow to the byre under the charge of Barbel, the milkmaid. Ulrica gazed at each in turn almost lovingly as they passed. There was the speckled Röschen, the sleek Blümchen, dappled in glossy brown and creamy white like a half-ripe horse-chestnut, the satin-coated Atlas, there were the other variously streaked and spotted creatures, and lastly, there was the snow-white Edelweiss, the pride of the establishment. Ulrica knew each one as intimately, by name and

by physiognomy, as though they had been her bosom friends.

The ten moved towards their byre somewhat wearily, with heavy feet and sunken heads, for the day had been oppressive, and one in a series of many oppressive days. It was a week past since the grass on the river-side meadows had begun to dry up. But to-night the long-looked-for rain appeared to be approaching. There was a leaden hue about the sunset sky and an ominous stillness in the air which spoke of a change at hand.

Presently an expression of displeasure crossed Ulrica's face, and, laying aside her rake, she left the garden just in time to intercept Pater Sepp, who, followed by a bare-legged lad laden with a great bunch of bracken fern, had been attempting somewhat hastily to gain the door of his house unperceived.

'Good-evening, Pater Sepp,' said Ulrica, as she joined him. Then without further preliminary: 'What have you brought that boy home with you for? Why is he not at school or at work?'

'I brought him home to carry the ferns, my dear child,' answered Pater Sepp, a little guiltily; 'they were rather heavy for me.'

'Exactly. And you gathered the ferns not because you wanted them a bit, but just in order to have an excuse for giving him a "sechser." Is that not it, Pater Sepp?'

'But I do want the ferns,' said Pater Sepp, somewhat feebly, 'the vases on St. Philomena's altar—'

'Have got plenty of flowers in them already, and plenty more waiting for them in the garden-beds. Well, well, mind at any rate that you don't give him more than *one* "sechser." You were not thinking of giving him more than one, I hope?'

Pater Sepp looked almost deprecatingly at Ulrica. 'To tell the truth, my dear child, I *was* thinking of giving him two; it is such a very hot afternoon, and the ferns are so heavy.'

Ulrica almost laughed. Pater Sepp's ingenuity in the invention of such excuses as this was positively inexhaustible. It was always either too hot or too cold or too windy

or too rainy to admit of a normal standard of remuneration being adopted. On this occasion Ulrica stood by until the fern-bearer was paid and dismissed. 'But it will be no good,' she said to herself. 'They will just wait till I am out of the way, and then that lazy urchin, who, of course, is lurking just outside the wall, will come back for a second "sechser"; I saw the two exchange a glance of mutual understanding. Dear, dear, I am beginning to be afraid that that old man is quite incorrigible.'

'The weather is going to break,' said Pater Sepp, by way of a change of subject.

'I hope so; the grass is all but burnt up for want of rain.'

'I am afraid we may have more rain than we want now,' said Pater Sepp, studying the dark corner of the sky with a peasant's quick eye for 'weather signs.' 'I don't like those clouds, there's ice as well as water in them. I have not seen them just that shape nor just that colour since '69.'

'69' was the year of which the date was recorded on the little tablet which was let into the wall of the Marienhof, and which Ulrica had noticed the first time she had passed that way. But she did not remember it now; those black clouds piled in the west meant to her only the long-desired rain. How could she know that they were fraught with the destiny of her life? And when, ere she closed her door that evening, she cast one more long, lingering look over her little kingdom, how could she guess that a whole world of grief and of joy, of rapture and of misery, lay between this moment and the day on which she would again see the prosperous Marienhof thus blooming and fruit-laden?

CHAPTER IX.

'THE STORM OF TEN MINUTES.'

IT was a little after midnight when Ulrica was awakened by a short sharp thunder-clap. So quickly was it over that she even felt doubtful as to whether the sound had been a reality and not rather a piece of a dream.

Leaving her bed, she groped her way to the window. The clouds of yesterday evening had crept over half the sky, they were creeping stealthily towards the moon, which, out of a space of transparent blue, still poured its light into the valley. It had not rained yet, she could see that by the want of sparkle on the moonlit flower-heads in the garden, and there was no wind, for the leaves of the old pear tree, which almost touched the pane, hung motionless. Over in the Pfarrhof there was a moving light,—why was Pater Sepp not in his bed?

A long silence followed upon the thunder-clap; the uneasy bellowing of one of the cows in the byre was the only sound audible. 'It must have been a dream,' she said, and was about to leave the window, when she stood still again to listen. A hollow undefinable rumble was drawing nearer and nearer. It was the wind coming over the mountains. Now it was shaking the pine trees on the hill-side, then it had swept into the valley, and was howling down the village street, and in one minute more it had reached the Marienhof. The trees in the orchard—as immovable the instant before as the painted decorations in a theatre—were one by one seized as though by invisible hands and convulsed to their very roots. And then the clouds rushed over the moon, and the pane before Ulrica's eyes was in one instant blurred with a sheet of water.

'The rain at last,' said Ulrica; and hastily throwing a shawl around her, she left the room to see to the fastenings of the other windows in the house. She had not made two steps, when she stood still in amazement. There was a rattle as of artillery on the roof overhead; so startling was the sound, so utterly unlike anything in her experience, that it did not immediately occur to her to think of hail. And now there followed ten minutes during which it seemed that all the evil spirits of hell had been let loose and were raging round the house. It was no longer possible to distinguish one sound from another. Was that the roar of the hurricane, or the thumping of the hailstones, the crash of a falling tree, or the roll of the thunder? Could that piercing tone be the cry of an animal in distress, or was it only a high note of the blast? The hissing of the

rain, the shivering of the broken glass panes, and the banging of doors burst open by the draught, grew and multiplied until there was nothing more but one huge deafening din.

As Ulrica hurried through the row of empty rooms, her light was dashed from her hand, and her shawl torn from her shoulders. Flashes of blue lightning showed her the trees without, staggering before the blast; hailstones as big as walnuts were showering in by the broken windows, and hopping over the bare floors. In the last room Barbel was on her knees beside a blest candle, which had done service in many a thunder-storm before now, but never in such a one as this. To judge from her gestures and the movements of her blanched lips, she was either shrieking or praying at the top of her voice, but the storm drowned every sound that was not itself. There was no doubt, however, in Barbel's mind, that the end of the world had come.

But the world was to stand for a little while yet. A lull as sudden as the first onslaught of the hurricane allowed the terrified milkmaid's voice to become audible in all its dissonant agony. The storm was drawing breath for a new onslaught, thought Ulrica, and sat down exhausted upon a chair, for, owing to its position, Barbel's window had been spared by the hailstones, and the room, therefore, appeared by comparison like a haven of refuge. There passed several minutes during which Barbel never ceased praying, and Ulrica sat and waited with set teeth for the next rush of the storm. But the minutes passed and nothing came. The hail had ceased together with the wind, and nothing but the rain was now to be heard thundering to the ground. That lull had not been a lull at all, but the end of the hurricane. 'The storm of ten minutes' was spoken of for long at Glockenau.

Ulrica did not sleep any more that night, nor, indeed, did any one in the village. Daylight was feverishly waited for by the terror-stricken peasants, for daylight alone could show them the extent of the ravages. And yet, when it came, they could form but a very imperfect idea of what had befallen them, for so thick was the air with the heavily

fallen rain that outlines were blurred and the marks of ruin shrouded in veils of damp. Owing to the masses of hail which had fallen, the air felt as chill as though it were November instead of August. All day long the heavy clouds rolled up lazily on the horizon one after the other in never-ending succession, and all day long the rain poured down straight and steady, 'like wet ropes,' as the saying is. It seemed as though that brief storm in the night had been the key which, with one sharp turn, had unlocked all the flood-gates of heaven. With every hour the river was rising, fed with terrific rapidity by the torrents from the mountains. Soon broken branches began to go past upon its swollen surface, and these were followed presently by whole trees uprooted by the hurricane. The more enterprising of the inhabitants of Glockenau, unwilling to let this rich store of firewood drift past unchallenged, spent the greater part of that day upon the foot-bridge at the lower end of the village, their coat-collars pulled up to their ears, and their trousers turned up over their boots, armed with hooked poles wherewith to fish up the most likely-looking branches. For the children, delighted with the novelty of this fishing game, this awful day had almost the charm of a holiday, and many were the shouts of glee over a more than usually glorious prize that was dragged dripping on to the bank. The further the day advanced, the more exciting did the game become. Thicker and thicker was the store of firewood coming down from the mountains, whirled past ever more wildly before the eyes of the tantalised spectators. By degrees the poles that had at first been used at their full length were discarded in favour of shorter instruments, and some of the more prudent left the bridge. It now stood scarcely more than four feet above the raging water.

Night came and brought no pause in the rain. Ulrica, lying awake in the Marienhof, listened to the sound for hours, the splash upon the roof, the soft trickle on the pane, the undefined rustle against the wall, as though a host of rats were gnawing their way through the stone. Day had already dawned when there broke upon the air the loud clamour of a bell. It was the alarm-bell which

generally acted as fire-signal, but which, on this occasion, was heralding the approach of a different sort of danger. At the same time the roll of a drum was to be heard in the village street. The drum had been pressed by the alarmed village authorities into a service very different from its usual peaceful mission of accompanying the village crier on his Saturday afternoon round, when the lost property of the week was loudly proclaimed down the length of the Glockenau high-street.

While Ulrica was hurriedly dressing, Pater Sepp rapped at her window.

‘I am going to the village,’ he said. ‘The people are all desperate, they are screaming for me—for you and for me; the Pfarrer and the Graf, that is the cry. If we do not go quickly, we shall be cut off.’

‘What is that noise?’ asked Ulrica. ‘Is it thundering again?’

‘That is the river; it will be up to the wall in less than half an hour.’

Ulrica ran to one of the windows which looked on to the road, and a terrific sight met her eyes. In that roaring mass of muddy water thick with spars, logs, planks, branches, roots, and tree-stems, rolling it up into great brown mountains and tumbling down again into gaping brown valleys, it was scarcely possible to recognise the peaceful water of crystal green with which she had so long been familiar. The wooden crucifix on the bank was gone, nothing but the tops of the willows which grew along the bank were visible. The bridge, by some miracle, was still standing, flush with the water, trembling from end to end with every wave that broke over it. Even as Ulrica looked, a huge tree-root, coloured and twisted like a gigantic coil of black and orange snakes, came charging down the river and plunged beneath the obstructing bridge. There was a slow upheaval of the planks, a pause, the bridge stood for one minute longer, then with the report of snapping wood it slowly burst asunder and instantly was wrenched to pieces.

And now the river had it all its own way. It was a mad spectacle indeed; wave after wave rolled past, its ragged crest reared for one instant, only to crumble into brown

powder and foam. Sometimes a quantity of planks, sucked by the current into shapeless, inseparable masses, came tearing past; yards of wooden paling, garden-gates torn off by the hinges, dog-kennels and ladders, all these spoke of the destruction already wrought in the village. Here the remnants of a roof rode aloft on the crest of a wave, and, close behind it, an uncanny mass bulged from the surface of the water, which, parting for an instant, showed it to be the swollen carcass of a horse. Then for two minutes the torrent would become one mass of bobbing corn-sheaves—somewhere at the upper end of the valley some wheat-field had, no doubt, been swept clean. Hen-coops and pig-styes pitched madly into each other; fruit trees torn out by the roots chased each other round the whirlpools, caught each other by their draggled branches much as one drowning man might catch another by the hair, and dashed on together in the never-ending rounds of this frenzied dance. The rain was coming down as heavily as ever, and already the first wave broke on to the road and sent a thin sheet of muddy water lapping up to the very bank which supported the wall of the Marienhof.

'If we do not go quickly,' urged Pater Sepp, 'we shall not reach the village.'

'Will the wall hold?' was Ulrica's thought, as she turned to follow him.

Not to follow him, to stay at home and watch over the Marienhof, did not even occur to her mind. She made no attempt to hold back Pater Sepp, because she felt instinctively that it would be useless; all she could do was to share the danger with him. The wall was her great hope. It is true that the farm lay on the very lowest ground of the valley, but the wall had withstood the flood of eleven years ago, so why should it not withstand this one? Besides, if only the rain would cease it was not likely that the water would rise beyond the bank.

But the rain showed no signs of ceasing. Steadily and mercilessly it came down all that second day. Ulrica and Pater Sepp had not been in the village more than an hour when already the street was knee-deep in water and every low-lying room was converted into a pond in which tables

and chairs floated wofully about. Looking back upon that day in after years it always appeared to Ulrica as a species of watery nightmare; the bewildered peasants, senseless with terror, the roaring of the river, the monotonous drip of the rain, they all were part of the nightmare. To see miniature torrents pouring from every rain-spout and water streaming down every wall soon came to appear the natural state of things; a little more of this and it would require some reflection to remember what woodwork looked like when it was *not* soaked, and what was your neighbour's appearance when his clothes were *not* drenched and the drops *not* trickling from his hat brim.

By nine o'clock the meadows beyond the river were turned into a lake; by midday the lower end of the village had to be abandoned. It was Ulrica who had assumed the chief command, and whose directions the terrified peasants, conscious of having lost their heads, were only too thankful to follow. It was to the Graf in they turned even more than to the Pfarrer, for Pater Sepp, though he worked without sparing himself, worked with his hands more than with his head, and consequently was apt to waste as much energy over the rescue of a wheelbarrow as over the saving of a store of wheat. Already in the early part of the day he had spent a precious quarter of an hour and most of his strength in tugging at a rope the other end of which he believed to be round the neck of an obdurate cow, but which, on nearer examination of the shed, proved to be attached to a millstone.

Carried away by the excitement of her responsible position, Ulrica had almost lost sight of the danger which threatened herself. It was some time after midday when the report suddenly spread that the wall of the Marienhof was giving way.

'The cows,' was Ulrica's first thought, for they represented all her wealth in this world.

'Are they not cut loose?' asked one of the peasants.

'No, I was sure the wall would hold. Perhaps Barbel has cut them loose;' but remembering the blest candle on the night of the storm, Ulrica did not say this with much confidence in Barbel's presence of mind.

It was too late, at any rate, to see to it now, for the return to the Marienhof was cut off.

Towards evening the rain ceased and further danger seemed over. The return, however, could not be thought of till next morning.

Another long, long night for Ulrica. Her pulses were still throbbing too violently with the excitement of the day to let her sleep. Each time she closed her eyes she seemed to be seeing that triumphal procession of wrecks carried past by the raging river, and in her ears the dismal drip of the rain still sounded long after it had ceased to fall.

Daylight showed the clouds to be breaking up in all directions. The river had now been going down for more than twelve hours, yet Ulrica, hurrying down the village street to learn her fate, waded ankle-deep in water. The nearer she got to the lower end of the valley, the more terrible were the signs of ravage around her. Her heart began to beat in dull apprehension. The 'river-meadows' were still under water; along the line which had once marked the river-bank the willows, all dragged one way by the tearing of the water, leant wearily against each other, their branches tattered and broken, their stems smothered in masses of weeds fantastically twisted around them. The tops of the hedges were full of the planks and spars which the retreating water had left there, and on the road at Ulrica's feet little fishes lay wriggling and gasping in the mud.

All at once she uttered a cry. At the turn of the road she had caught sight of the Marienhof. Of the enclosing wall there remained nothing but some formless clumps of bricks with wide breaches between, through which the water had broken its way. In a few minutes more she was standing in one of these breaches—there was no need to go round to the gate, and in fact there was no gate to go round to, and now the wreck lay open before her.

Pools of muddy water and mounds of wet bricks—the fragments of the wall—covered the ground. The fruit trees were thinned to half their number, and many of those that still stood were leafless, their bald branches peeled to the core by the hail. One fragment of the garden-paling

lay at Ulrica's feet, half buried in the mud; the rest had, no doubt, gone to join the triumphal procession on the river. A flattened mass of green pulp, with here and there a red or yellow spot faintly showing, marked the place where the garden had once been. A heap of wet feathers in one corner to which Ulrica made her way proved to be a perfect hecatomb of drowned hens, and a few steps further on, the white cow, Edelweiss, lay stark and stiff upon her side.

But it was only when she reached the cow-byre that Ulrica fully grasped the extent of the blow which had fallen on her. Three or four of the stalls were empty; had Röschen and Blümchen and Atlas got loose themselves, or had Barbel had time to free them? It did not matter now, and as for the six remaining cows, they had all been drowned where they stood.

The wreck was complete; what the hail had spared the hurricane had taken, and what the hurricane had left standing had been washed away by the flood. Dairy and orchard and garden were destroyed; the ducks alone had suffered no harm and rode merrily upon the newly formed ponds. And now, as though to let no detail of the ruin escape Ulrica's eyes, the sun burst out of the clouds and mockingly lighted up this scene of desolation.

Ulrica covered her face with her hands. She knew that she was ruined. Was there anything more in this world that Fate could take from her? Yes, there was one more thing.

She was still standing with her eyes covered to shut out the picture before her, when heavy steps were heard splashing through the slush, the measured steps of men who are bearing a burden. Ulrica looked up and saw a small group of peasants wending their way between the pools of water and the heaps of bricks towards the Pfarrhof. In their midst there walked two who carried a chair slung between them, and on the chair sat Pater Sepp, his white head sunk on his breast and the water dripping from his soaked clothes.

'I am afraid it will turn to inflammation of the lungs,' said the village doctor to Ulrica, when the old priest had been laid in his bed. 'Men of seventy-eight have no busi-

ness saving other people's tables and chairs in floods. We'll pull him through, however.'

Ulrica made no reply. From the moment that she had felt his burning hand and marked the feverish brilliancy of his blue eyes she knew that Pater Sepp was lost to her.

'It was not my fault, my dear,' he explained to her eagerly, 'really not my fault; it was those pigs, you know, a whole litter of them, and all that the widow Heller has got; I could not let them be drowned before her eyes.'

This was not the moment to give way, Ulrica felt she had need of all her strength for the struggle that was coming. She would save him if human endeavour could save him, she vowed to herself. During five weary days she fought for his life as though her own depended on it, but it was vain care. The old man's strength sank hour by hour, and on the morning of the sixth day, before one ray of sunshine had reached the valley, before one little bird had twittered in the branches, Pater Sepp was in heaven.

Two days later Ulrica was returning from the second funeral that she had followed in Glockenau. Her courage had held her up till this moment, but it seemed as though it could carry her no farther. In the wasted garden of the Marienhof she sat down upon the trunk of a fallen tree and broke into a passion of tears.

For the first time in her life her spirit seemed broken, for the first time she told herself that she was conquered.

'I can do no more,' she said to herself between her sobs, 'I am at the end of my strength.'

Once more she stood alone, a beggar and an orphan. The work at which she had laboured for a year and a half had been undone within three days. Once again the future had become dark. What was to become of her? What was to become of the Marienhof? Would Pater Sepp's successor suffer her to remain where she was? And—supposing the answer to be favourable, where was she to find the means to start her work afresh? Of the ten cows only two had escaped the flood, and had been found straying in the woods above the farm. The byre would have to be newly stocked, the wall rebuilt, the pasture beside the river freed from the slime which lay over it in a thick layer, making

the grass useless ; all this demanded money, and she had not a penny in the world and not a helping hand to grasp. Hold ! Was that indeed so ? Had not a hand once been held out towards her, and had she not thanklessly pushed it aside ?

When the idea of appealing to her unknown cousin first presented itself to her mind as a possibility, Ulrica put it from her angrily. But, unawares to herself, it crept back again. The temptation was great, and in her present state of discouragement she was not strong enough to turn from it. Had he not claimed a promise from her ? A promise which, indeed, she had not given, but which neither had she refused. And that help had been frankly offered and honestly meant ; she had felt that even then, despite her indignation. After all, he was her cousin, a near relation of her father's, and, of course, she would pay him back every penny of the loan as soon as she had once more gained ground beneath her feet.

For two days these thoughts pursued her. On the evening of the second day she wrote the following letter :

‘ GLOCKENAU, *August 16th*, 1881.

‘ MY DEAR COUSIN : Since I last wrote everything has changed for me. Glockenau and my farm have been ruined by a flood, the old priest who saved me from starvation was buried on Saturday. I am very near starvation again. Once before you offered me money and I was angry ; perhaps you will refuse it now that I ask for it. I have been told that I may keep on the farm, but no one has told me how to restock it without money. I should require to buy at least four cows, and these cows will cost between fifty and sixty florins apiece. Will you lend me three hundred florins, to be repaid in instalments within the next two years ? Also tell me what the interest should be ; I wish to pay you whatever is the usual interest which you would get for your money in England.

‘ Your cousin,

‘ ULRICA ELDRINGEN.

The letter once despatched, a certain uneasiness took possession of Ulrica. It was the first appeal for help she

had ever made in her life, and so foreign to her nature was the step she had taken that she actually caught herself hoping for a refusal.

Sir Gilbert's reply was somewhat long in coming, and when it came the envelope did not bear the usual lilac stamp, but the postmark of a place in the Bavarian highlands where he had been shooting for some weeks past and to which her letter had followed him back from England. A banknote for a thousand florins in Austrian money fell out of the envelope; nothing but a few hasty lines accompanied it. 'Why not buy a round dozen cows when you are about it?' was scrawled upon the paper. 'You could not start the farm again comfortably with four. As for the interest, you can't have been serious, surely? Anyway, I have no time to discuss it now, for the trap is at the door and we are off to the Chamois.'

Ulrica picked up the banknote which had slipped to the floor, and laying it into a fresh envelope, sat down and wrote to Sir Gilbert as follows:

'I am not going to accuse you again of wishing to insult me, but all the same you have made a mistake. You have not fulfilled the request I put to you; I asked you to *lend* me three hundred florins, not to make me a *present* of a thousand, for, of course, I understand the meaning of your not having time to discuss the question of interest. Here is the money back again; perhaps this will convince you that I am serious. Don't send me any more, I wouldn't take it. I think I had lost my senses for a little when I asked for your help, but I have recovered now and feel strong enough again to fight the world by myself.'

When Ulrica had seen the envelope containing the banknote safe into the post-box, she felt as though a stone had dropped from her heart. She was not conscious of any anger against Sir Gilbert, rather she was thankful to him for the excuse he had given her for returning the money. She could breathe again; her self-respect was restored.

A week passed, and no further sign came from that place

in the Bavarian highlands. Sir Gilbert had apparently accepted her decision.

Then at the end of that week all at once a stranger appeared quite unexpectedly in Glockenau.

CHAPTER X.

ULRICA'S COUSIN.

IT was now the beginning of September, and though the memory of the flood was not many weeks old, already the worst marks of the ravage had disappeared. Crops, indeed, were ruined, cattle drowned, and orchards thinned, but, though poverty had entered into many a house where comfort had once reigned, yet, outwardly, Glockenau had resumed its everyday physiognomy. Glass is not expensive and palings cost next to nothing when stranded wood is littering the ground in all directions, and if the cucumbers and the tomatoes which filled the gardens a month ago have all been washed away, and if many a room has preserved relics of the flood in the shape of damp-stained walls and warped floors, the new palings and the new windows do not betray much of what lies behind them. The river itself has long since recovered from its brief madness, and, spanned by a new foot-bridge, beside which a new crucifix is just now receiving its last coat of paint, flows once more between its rightful banks, as tame and harmless looking as though it knew of no such things as uprooted trees and drowned cows.

One evening early in September Ulrica was on her way to the village shop, when she heard a well-known lumbering sound behind her and was overtaken by the *Stellwagen*, whose daily appearance was the one link between Glockenau and the outer world. Glancing towards it as it passed her, she was surprised to see a pair of shoulders clad in what appeared to be a grey travelling-suit, the back of a head together with a fraction of a 'deer-stalker' just

visible through the dingy window-pane. Grey travelling-suits and 'deer-stalkers' were not articles of attire generally affected by the inhabitants of Glockenau, and moreover this particular travelling-suit, cursory as had been the glimpse which Ulrica had of it, bore upon it the unmistakable stamp of an absolutely first-class article. It may have lain in the turn of the collar, or the line of the shoulder-seam, or the grain of the texture; in any case, it was something impalpable and indefinable, which admitted of no mental comparison between this particular grey coat and other grey coats worn by the Leopolds and Augusts who were used to paying their Sunday visits to the valley, and which therefore bore in upon Ulrica's mind the instant conviction that this was a visitor of another sort.

She had accomplished her errand and was returning homewards when quick steps sounded behind her. In the interval she had forgotten the *Stellwagen* and its occupant, but, hearing that step, she immediately by some instinct connected it with the enigmatical grey coat, for the one belonged as little to Glockenau as did the other. She was saying this to herself, when a tall, broad-shouldered man walked past her, swinging a cane in one hand and looking attentively from side to side, as though in search of something. Presently he accosted a small boy who was diverting himself with a complicated game in which mud and horse-chestnuts formed the chief elements. The small boy looked puzzled, but ended by pointing down the road; it almost seemed to Ulrica as though he were pointing at the Marienhof. By this time she was again abreast of the stranger, who, having thanked his small informant, was walking on again. He glanced at her across the road, then raised his hat and remarked in wofully broken German that it was a fine evening. Ulrica having agreed to this remark, they walked on for some minutes more in silence and with the road between them. She was utterly at a loss how to account for his presence here, unless, indeed, he were one of the artists who occasionally, at rare intervals, found their way into the valley in search of pine-tree effects. She had just come to this conclusion when the stranger spoke again.

'It seems that we are going the same way,' he remarked. 'May I not carry that parcel for you?' and he crossed the road towards her.

'Thank you. I prefer carrying it myself.' She glanced up at him in some surprise, for stray travellers do not, as a rule, address young women in peasant dress in such a strictly courteous tone. She now perceived that he was a man no longer quite young, but of a commanding presence and well-cut features; his short, light brown beard contrasted sharply with his dark eyebrows. The eyes which met Ulrica's were of a deep hazel tint.

'I wonder how it comes that I can understand you so much better than any one else I have spoken to since I got to this place; and yet, by your dress, you belong to Glockenau.'

'Yes, I belong to Glockenau; that is to say, I do not belong to any other place.'

They had now reached the wooden enclosure which was doing temporary duty in place of the demolished wall of the Marienhof.

'Good-evening,' said Ulrica, with a short inclination of her head, as she turned into the narrow lane.

'Not quite yet,' was the reply; 'it seems that our paths are not to part quite so soon,' and he turned into the lane beside her. Arrived at the gate she was on the point of once more wishing him good-evening, when the supposed artist, pushing open the gate, remarked that he was going in there.

'So am I,' said Ulrica, in increasing wonder. 'He must be going to the Pfarrhof,' she said to herself; 'something about the new Pfarrer, I suppose.'

But he was not going to the Pfarrhof; having cast a rapid glance about him, he turned without hesitation towards the older house.

'That is the Marienhof, is it not?' he asked.

'Yes, that is the Marienhof.'

'You seem to be going there as well as I.'

'As well as you? Are *you* going to the Marienhof? What on earth can you have got to do there?'

'Very likely the same that you are about to do; to pay a visit.'

'I am not paying a visit, I live here.'

'You live here? Then you must live with Countess Eldringen? Do you know her? Are you— Good Lord!' he broke out in English, 'what an extraordinary duffer I am! You are Ulrica, of course, my cousin Ulrica; it was the dress that checkmated me, you never told me about the dress, Cousin Ulrica,' and he held out his hand with a smile that broke like sunshine over his face.

Ulrica did not immediately take the hand.

'I don't quite understand,' she stammered, likewise speaking English. 'You can't surely be—'

'My name is Nevyll,' said the stranger, laughing outright. 'Why do you stare at me as though I were my ghost instead of myself?'

'Because it seems impossible; you never told me either—'

'What did I never tell you?'

'That you were—I mean I always thought you were an elderly gentleman.'

Sir Gilbert put back his head against the doorpost and broke into a laugh which had in it so infectious a ring that Ulrica was surprised to find herself laughing too. But in the middle of it he broke off with something that was almost a sigh.

'So I am,' he said, in a different tone, 'a much more elderly gentleman than you can imagine, Cousin Ulrica.'

Ulrica had by this time recovered from her first surprise.

'So you really, *really* are my cousin Gilbert?' she broke out joyfully. 'I cannot tell you how glad I am to have a cousin; it is almost as good as having a brother. Come into the house; you will take supper with me, will you not? I can only give you roast potatoes, but you wouldn't get anything much better at the inn.'

'There is nothing I dote upon like roast potatoes,' said Sir Gilbert, as he followed her into the big, square room, which was entered through the house door without any intermediate passage. This room, in which Ulrica spent her time when she was not at work outside, and into which she had gathered all the small store of furniture which belonged to the Marienhof, occupied the whole depth of the house,

and had two small deep-set windows looking on to the road.

‘Is this where you live?’ said Sir Gilbert, standing still and looking round in surprise at the whitewashed walls, the rafters of the ceiling, the rude tables and chairs, the big, old-fashioned green stove with the broad wooden bench running round it. The only article in the room which could be counted as an ornament was a small photograph of Emil Eldringen, framed in black and hanging on the space of wall between the two windows.

‘Yes, this is where I live,’ said Ulrica, as she rapidly dusted the bench by the stove; ‘this is my *Stube*, and this bench is the place of honour—at any rate, it is the most comfortable seat I have to offer you, though it is nothing now to what it is on a winter evening. Please sit down here and tell me how you came to be at Glockenau, and in the meantime I will light the fire.’

‘Surely you are not thinking of lighting it yourself!’ exclaimed Sir Gilbert, in horror-stricken tones. ‘Let me call somebody, please.’

‘There isn’t anybody to call,’ said Ulrica placidly; ‘who do you suppose would light the fire, if I didn’t do it?’

‘Some servant, I suppose, whoever does it usually.’

‘But it is I who do it usually. You speak as though I had a whole staff at my heels; surely you forget that I have got no money.’

‘To be sure; it’s awfully stupid of me, I really beg your pardon; but still—I don’t quite understand—’ and Sir Gilbert, evidently somewhat perplexed, sat down upon the chair she had pushed towards him, and followed Ulrica thoughtfully with his eyes as, with colour somewhat heightened by the excitement of the unexpected event, she moved about the room busy with her preparations. She had lit a small lamp and placed it on the table. Its rays fell full upon Sir Gilbert, revealing his features more clearly than had done the failing light of the September evening.

There was no doubt that in his early youth he must have possessed good looks very much above the average; even now, in his forty-second year, he was a man whom few

people passed by without a second look. It was not alone his tall stature and the grand breadth of his shoulders that arrested the eye, it was more still his noble head and the peculiar depth of his glance. What he had lost in youthful charm he had gained in expression. There was a history in his face, a history not indeed to be read but to be guessed at in the deep lines that marked his broad brow, in the thoughtful gaze of his hazel eyes and the premature silver that gleamed through the rich chestnut-brown of his hair. Something of weariness, too, something of dissatisfaction lay upon his face when in repose, but vanished like magic when he spoke.

‘You have not yet answered my question,’ said Ulrica, as she approached the big stove with an armful of wood.

‘About how I came to be here? That is very quickly told. To make a clean breast of it at once: I came to look at you.’

‘To look at me!’

‘Exactly. I have been worried more than you can imagine during this year past by my vain endeavour to imagine what a young woman could be like who not only turns herself into a farmer at a moment’s notice, but also gets her farm to pay. I am not certain that I should have gathered together enough energy for the step—for, as you have yet to learn, I am the most indolent of men—if that last letter of yours had not finished me. It found me, as you know, on the Continent; I have not been on the Continent for years, but Count Sickern of the Bavarian Legation asked me over for the chamois season, and I couldn’t resist. It was at T—— that I got your letter, and the logic by which you supported your refusal of that banknote tickled my fancy so immensely and raised my curiosity to so unbearable a pitch, that I actually tore myself away from the chamois. I have never been snubbed so frequently by any one person before, and I felt that I could not return to England without at least setting eyes upon the dispenser of these snubs.’

‘In other words, you came to look at me as a sort of natural curiosity?’

‘Well, I am afraid that is about it.’

‘And am I like what you expected?’

Ulrica, as she put her question in the most matter-of-fact of tones, had risen from her knees beside the stove. She looked at her visitor with perfect seriousness across the room, shaking some stray wood-shavings from her apron.

There are many women whose beauty fails to strike at first sight, but rather grows upon the spectator by degrees, who are ever appearing in new lights, and whose charms, being dependent on circumstances of mood or surroundings, rather insinuate themselves upon the senses than take them captive. There are others, again, who reveal themselves immediately and entirely, about whose claim to beauty there can be no difference of opinion. Ulrica belonged to this second order. There was nothing insinuating about her beauty, nothing complex; rather, there was a sort of severe simplicity which could not fail to meet with instant recognition. Her clear white skin, the pure colour in her cheek, her well-cut grey eyes, the moulding of her perfect figure, which no dress, however clumsy, could hope to disguise—all these were things which the first glance fully revealed, and which, once seen, were not easily forgotten.

‘No,’ said Sir Gilbert, after an instant’s pause, ‘you are not like what I expected.’

‘It seems, therefore, that we have had quite wrong ideas about each other,’ said Ulrica, beginning to take down some dishes from the shelf; ‘that is rather funny. Do you know, I used to imagine that you must be gouty.’

Sir Gilbert broke once more into his infectious laugh. ‘Gouty. In the name of wonder,’ he began—‘Good gracious!’ he interrupted himself, springing up from his chair, ‘this is more than I can stand. Don’t say that you are going to peel those potatoes yourself!’

‘Certainly I am. I told you that I have got no servants.’

‘But surely you must have somebody, a cook at least; everybody has got a cook.’

‘I have not. I used to have a girl for milking the cows, but I had to discharge her after the flood because I couldn’t

pay her wages. As I haven't any cows now to milk, it isn't of much consequence.'

'Great God! But are you absolutely alone? You surely don't mean to say that you—' in an awe-struck tone—'that you black your own boots?'

'Yes. That is to say, when I can afford the blacking.'

'This is awful. Do you *like* blacking boots?'

'Beggars can't be choosers,' said Ulrica shortly. 'But, after all, what is there so very surprising about it? Why do you look so amazed? Didn't you know all along that I had only just enough to eat?'

'I suppose I did know it, in a sort of way,' said Sir Gilbert, with a look of almost comical perplexity, 'but, somehow, it didn't look as bad in the letters as it does now. The idea of your lighting the fire yourself, and peeling potatoes and things—and young ladies are so particular about their hands. They declare that everything spoils them.'

Ulrica laid down the potato she was peeling. 'Look! Is there much to spoil here, do you think?'

The hands which she held towards him across the table were of a faultless shape, with long taper fingers and small round wrists, but they bore the marks of toil, not only in their sun-browned complexion, but also in the roughness of the surface and the hardness of the palms. Something about those toil-worn hands seemed to awe Sir Gilbert; he was silent for fully a minute before he returned to the charge.

'But look here, though you haven't any other servant you really should have a cook. I never heard of any one not having a cook.'

'You will get to hear a good many strange things if you pursue my acquaintance. What do you imagine that a cook's wages would be?'

'Well, that's more than I can say. I am not up in those things. Let me see, is it a hundred or a hundred and fifty that Maillac gets?'

'Who is Maillac?'

'He's the head of the kitchen department, a Frenchman. Makes the most wonderful *ragouts*.'

Ulrica burst into an almost convulsive laugh.

'A hundred pounds!' she gasped. 'You pay your cook a hundred pounds! Double of what the profit of the whole Marienhof would be in a good year! And you don't even know whether it isn't fifty pounds more! That is neither here nor there. Oh, don't you see how ridiculous it is? How can we talk of these things together? How can you understand my situation or I yours? I told you that beggars couldn't be choosers; well, you are the chooser and I am the beggar, and as long as it remains so we shall always be at cross-purposes.'

Sir Gilbert looked at her very seriously.

'Why should it remain so, Cousin Ulrica? Why will you insist upon being a beggar? If you would only relent so far as to let me—'

'Let us drop that subject, please,' said Ulrica, colouring violently, as she swept the potato-parings into her apron.

'But that letter,' began Sir Gilbert, almost diffidently.

'That letter was written in a moment of mental aberration. I had slept badly for a great many nights and I suppose that had an unfavourable effect upon the balance of my mind. I am quite recovered now, thank Heaven.'

'And what are you going to do?'

'To begin again. In fact, I have begun again. The last heap of bricks was cleared away yesterday.'

'You are certainly the most determined young woman I have ever known, and also the most suspicious. You seem positively to be on the lookout for insult. It's a pity, Cousin Ulrica; suspicion doesn't suit you.'

Ulrica did not immediately answer. 'Perhaps you are right,' she said after a minute, 'perhaps I am suspicious, but it can't be helped. It is circumstances that have made me so. Let us talk of something else, please.'

And so they did; they talked of many things while the potatoes were roasting and while they were being eaten. That first evening spent in the company of her hitherto unknown English cousin remained a distinct landmark in Ulrica's life. To be met on terms of equality by a man of education and breeding, not to be either looked down upon or made love to, this was, in her experience, unprecedented.

It filled her with wonder and with gratitude. The rustic clock over the door ticked on unnoticed while Ulrica sat and talked to Sir Gilbert of her serio-comic struggles with Pater Sepp, while she described to him the various incidents of the flood and told him of her life during the past year. It seemed to Ulrica that she must have known her cousin Gilbert for years. There had been no breaking of ice in this their first acquaintance, because on Sir Gilbert's side there had been no ice to break, and because the genial warmth of his manner had instantly melted the crust of Ulrica's usually rather rigid reserve.

When ten o'clock struck upon the church clock alongside, she started to her feet aghast.

'Is it possible? And I have to be up at four to-morrow! Let me light you to the gate.'

She lighted him to the gate and held the lamp there while he walked down the dark lane towards the road. At the corner he looked round and waved his hand.

'Good-night, Cousin Ulrica.'

'Good-night, Cousin Gilbert.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE TWO MILLSTONES.

WHAT was it that had happened? The question was stirring in Ulrica's mind before she was well awake next morning. 'I know now,' she said to herself, as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. 'I have got a cousin, a real cousin all to myself. I am no longer quite alone.'

The surprise of discovering that this cousin, instead of being old and gouty, was a man in the most vigorous health and scarcely past the prime of life, had soon vanished. Now that she came to think of it she could not imagine what had given rise to that first impression—it had taken root in some chance remark, and the reserve which Sir Gil-

bert had always observed with regard to his own concerns and to his person had left that first erroneous idea undisturbed.

‘Going for a walk?’ asked Sir Gilbert when, in the course of the afternoon, he presented himself at the gate of the Marienhof and found Ulrica stepping forth with a basket on her arm.

‘A walk? Oh no, I never take walks, I have plenty of exercise without that. I am going to the mill; the miller’s wife has just been here to ask me for some of the same medicine that I gave to the shoemaker’s baby last week. Her baby has got something quite different the matter with it, but she argues that, since the medicine cured one baby, it must cure another. I wonder whether all peasants are as pig-headed as my Glockenauers! I am going to the mill myself to see about it.’

‘Do you go in for doctoring?’

‘I go in for anything that comes in my way, and doctoring is one of the things that comes in my way oftenest.’

‘May I go with you to the mill?’

‘Yes, certainly.’

It was a crisp autumn day, and the sun was lavishly gilding the roofs of Glockenau as the two walked through the village.

Ulrica had told Sir Gilbert that it would take them barely twenty minutes to reach the mill, but in reality it took them an hour, and this not because they walked slowly or lingered by the way, but owing to various impediments to their progress in the shape of peasants with grievances who promptly seized this favourable opportunity of waylaying the Grafín. Would she give her opinion as to the position of the new hen-house to be erected in the place of the one washed away by the flood? pleaded the Distelbauer. Could she recommend anything against mildewed walls, his neighbour wanted to know? And scarcely had the hen-house been satisfactorily settled and the wall mercilessly condemned than Ulrica, starting once more on her way, was arrested by a small boy sent racing after her to ask whether the Grafín would step in to speak to his mother on a matter of urgency and importance.

‘Do you know what the matter of urgency and importance was?’ said Ulrica when at the end of five minutes she rejoined Sir Gilbert. ‘It was an old petticoat, about which I was to decide whether it would cut up into trousers for the very messenger sent after me. There was not much more than a square inch of the fabric not in holes; not quite enough for a neckerchief, let alone trousers, and yet I know she would have taken all day to come to a resolution about it; she would not have felt justified in throwing it on the dust-heap without my sanction.’

‘Really?’ said Sir Gilbert, somewhat absently. He had been very talkative at first, but the further they advanced up the village and the more the interruptions were multiplied the more silent and thoughtful did he become. By the time they reached the shadow of the first pine tree his answers were reduced almost to monosyllables.

Her errand at the mill being accomplished, Ulrica was about to turn homeward, when Sir Gilbert interposed:

‘Home already? On such a day as this? I want to see a little more of these pine trees since I am about it, and surely you won’t leave me to wander about by myself.’

‘Very well,’ said Ulrica, ‘I will take you a little further on; it is a great waste of time, I am afraid, for I ought to be at work; but, after all, you are my guest.’

They walked on, following a grass-grown cart-track which wound among the trees.

‘Tell me,’ began Sir Gilbert abruptly, after a silence, ‘what makes you worry over the concerns of these great babies down in the village? It can’t possibly interest you to know whether the new hen-house is to be placed three steps to the right or three steps to the left of the pigsty, and surely you have got business enough of your own on hand without wasting your time over an old woman’s petticoat.’

‘Possibly I have; but you forget that, for one thing, each of these people is a sort of legacy left to me by Pater Sepp; he put them under my care.’

‘Is that your only reason?’

‘Well, no; I believe that what my poor father used to call my “talent for tyranny” has got a good deal to do

with it. My father always declared that I was never happy unless I had somebody to order about, and so I suppose it gratifies me to order about these peasants. And then—'

'Then what?'

'Well, you see, nothing tries my patience so much as to see things go wrong without at least trying to put them right. I couldn't possibly stand by and watch so many good opportunities wasted and so much comfort lost simply because people don't know how to use their brains.'

'It must give you a lot of anxiety.'

'Do you know, I think it would give me more anxiety if I didn't do it. It seems to me that if one has been given brains and strength and health, one has a sort of responsibility put upon one.'

Sir Gilbert raised his head sharply and looked at Ulrica with an almost startled expression.

'You see,' continued Ulrica, 'it can't possibly be meant that one is to keep all that for one's self. It would be so abominably selfish not to try at least to leave the bit of the world one lives on a little wiser or better or more comfortable than one found it. Look at my Glockenauers, for instance: in one respect they are exactly like their own cattle; each steps just where the one before him has stepped; with a hundred other and better ways staring him in the face, each will put his foot on the same spot where the other has put his, and would go on in the same way forever if somebody whose ideas soar a little higher than turnips and ploughshares were not occasionally thrown in contact with them.'

'I see, and you are the person with the ideas above the ploughshares. What a delicious bit of green.'

They had just stepped out between the pine trees on to an open spot—the same that Ulrica had visited once before, on the morning after her father's funeral, when she had been in search of a quiet nook in which to lay the plans for her future. From that day to this she had not again seen the old mill-wheel standing silent between the moss-capped rocks, nor heard the tinkling of that narrow thread of water which was all that remained of the mill-stream of long ago. In its autumnal aspect the space

around the ruins of the old mill was no less inviting a retreat than it had been upon that April morning, only that the green velvet mantles of the rocks were beginning to show signs of wear, and the bramble-branches which once floated so lightly and so carelessly over the grave of the dead mill had now begun to fall into heavy arches under the weight of their swelling fruit, and had grown too busy and aged to flirt any more with the breeze. Over across the plain, framed by red pine stems and arched over with a heavy black-green branch, the great mountains bounded the horizon, clear-cut and glittering, with their bright lights of crystal whiteness and their deep shadows of icy blue.

‘It’s like a piece out of a German fairy tale,’ said Sir Gilbert, looking round him. ‘I shall not be a bit surprised if that pine tree begins to give us its biography presently; and that mill-wheel there must have a lot of interesting reminiscences, if only one could set it agoing. And here are two ready-made seats, too. I vote that we sit down.’

The clear September sunshine, sliding its shafts from between the pine branches, was fantastically decorating the bramble-bushes, throwing spots upon some leaves, laying rims on others, streaking and speckling and tipping with gold whatever it could lay hands on. There was just enough breeze stirring to sway the big bunches of yellow ragwort that grew within the shade of the trees, and which seemed to catch fire every time they waved forward into the light, only to be roughly extinguished whenever they sank back into the shadow.

Ulrica and Sir Gilbert had been sitting for some minutes, when, on turning towards her cousin, she was surprised to find his eyes fixed upon her face with a scrutinising expression.

‘That is rather an uncomfortable theory of yours,’ he remarked abruptly, beginning to switch off some grass-heads with his cane.

‘What theory?’ asked Ulrica in surprise.

‘That about the responsibility of people with brains towards people with none. Where did you get the idea from?’

‘I am sure I can’t say. Unless,’ she added after a

pause, 'unless it was from Pater Sepp. Not that poor, dear Pater Sepp had any superfluous brains; but he showed me what sympathy can do, sheer sympathy *without* brains—from that to the idea that sympathy combined *with* brains could do more still is not a very far step.'

'You speak only of sympathy and of brains; does money play no part in your philanthropical ideas?'

'Money! Oh, if I had sympathy and brains *and* money, then there is no saying what I couldn't do with such a combination.'

Again Sir Gilbert raised his head quickly and gave her that startled look.

'And what would you think of a person who possessed all the requisites, money included, and who yet left his bit of the world neither wiser nor better nor more comfortable than it was when he found it?'

'I should pity him,' said Ulrica simply, 'for I do not think that such a person could feel happy.'

'And you—you are happy at this sort of work?'

'Yes, as things go, I think I may say I am happy—certainly I have never been so happy as during this past year. I have found my place in the world. Until I drifted into this harbour I was nobody. Out there in the big world I was an unfortunate half-and-half creature, neither fish nor flesh, neither black nor white, I belonged to nothing. A relation of my father's is in the ministry, a relation of my mother's is a hair-dresser; one of them makes laws and the other makes false chignons—there were absurdities on all sides. Here these things don't count; I am simply an isolated fact.'

'Exactly. But I should have thought that you were rather too conspicuous an isolated fact to be left unmolested.'

'I used to think so too,' said Ulrica dispassionately. 'During the first days I spent in this valley my looks were very much in my way, but the answer to that is again: Pater Sepp. If Pater Sepp had not taken me by the hand I should never have found my footing; once the shadow of his protection fell upon me I was safe, and even the memory of that protection is enough to place me above all

petty annoyances. But,' Ulrica interrupted herself, 'it strikes me that our talk is a very one-sided affair; we are talking of nothing but myself and my life; you have told me nothing about your life, Cousin Gilbert, of your occupations, your interests. I seem to know so little about you—even in your letters you were always asking questions and never answering any. How is that?'

Sir Gilbert laughed rather gloomily.

'What should I tell you of? What good would it be if I were to expatiate to you on the doubtful delights of the London season, or to draw pictures of the different ways we have of wasting our time in country houses? What should I talk to you of? Of the beauties presented at the last drawing-room? Of Lady So-and-So's diamonds—or Lord Thingumbob's debts?'

'But surely you must talk of other things besides peoples' diamonds and debts?'

'Oh yes, we occasionally talk of making and unmaking governments, and we discuss poetry and criticise the last cartoon in *Punch*. I have known myself to become quite eloquent over either lawn-tennis or Euclid, according to whether I took a bread-and-butter Miss or a Blue-Stocking into dinner.'

'Never mind the conversations, tell me about your occupations, the places you go to.'

'No good either, it would all be Greek to you. Have you ever heard of a place called Hurlingham? Or of another called Lord's?'

'No.'

'All the better for you. Take my advice and don't bother about them. They get wonderfully stale, I assure you.'

'Do they? Then why do you go in for them? Surely you can't be forced to go to all those places you mention if you dislike it so?'

'But I never said I disliked it,' said Sir Gilbert, almost irritably, and switching away at the grass-heads more vigorously than ever. 'I suppose I should dislike it very much more if I were cut off from all these things for good and all. There's a tyrant in the world called Habit, with

a smiling face and velvet clutches; neither Necessity nor Ambition are as hard taskmasters as he. And even though one may occasionally be visited by a glimmer of the general insanity of the whole concern—hang it!’ Sir Gilbert interrupted himself with a short and bitter laugh, ‘it’s as good a way as any other to keep one from thinking. And after all, why should a man who has the chance of enjoying his life not also have the right to do so?’

There was a distinct point of interrogation in his voice, and Ulrica, raising her eyes, met a questioning look. Sir Gilbert seemed to be expecting a ratification of the sentiment just announced. Instead of answering at once, she examined his face rather curiously for a minute.

‘Do you not agree with me?’ he asked, almost defiantly.

‘Certainly; if he *does* enjoy it. You speak as if you did not.’

Her steady gaze seemed to disquiet him, but he did not reply.

‘And yet you have everything: riches, position, health—’

‘That is not everything.’

‘It is more than most people have.’

‘Look here, Cousin Ulrica,’ broke in Sir Gilbert, giving himself a shake and speaking in his usual good-humoured tone, from which all bitterness had now vanished, ‘you are not going to lure me on in this way. *I will not* disarrange the artistic balance of this idyllic spot by talking of Gilbert Nevyll. I can’t tell you how dead-sick I occasionally get of Gilbert Nevyll and all that concerns him. Supposing he has his grievances, rightful or wrongful, never mind which, let us leave him and them “out there,” as you call it. As long as I breathe the air of this enchanted valley of yours, let me try and forget that I am Gilbert Nevyll. It’s so seldom I have a chance of talking of anything half so invigorating as peasants and cows and pine trees; let’s stick to them, by all means.’

‘And how long do you intend to breathe the air of this valley?’

‘When shall I be off again, you mean? Where is your sense of hospitality, Cousin Ulrica? In point of fact, I had not originally contemplated a stay of more than

twenty-four hours, but then also originally I had not counted upon finding you quite so obdurate. Seriously, you cannot imagine that after having seen you, my cousin's daughter, leading the life of a peasant, and with nothing but the memory of an old priest to protect you, I could quietly go home again and leave you to milk your cows undisturbed? We must find some way of altering all this, but I foresee that it will take rather more than twenty-four hours.'

'If it is with the object of persuading me to accept your help that you are staying on here,' said Ulrica, stiffening on the instant, 'you may as well leave Glockenau by the *Stellwagen* this evening.'

'Thank you, I shall not. You seem to have the whole valley pretty much at your orders, but I happen to be a free British subject. Besides, I don't see why you alone should have the exclusive privilege of obstinacy. Remember that we have some of the same blood in our veins. Do you know that, with the exception of Ernest, you and the Minarts are the nearest relations I have in the world?'

'Who is Ernest?'

'Ernest is poor George's son, my nephew and heir. He is to be married next month.'

'And George is the second boy on the photograph, your younger brother. I did not know that he was dead.'

'He died of inflammation of the lungs three years ago; George was always rather shaky about the chest, and I am sorry to say that Ernest takes after him. I was rather anxious about him when I left England; he had had a nasty cough hanging about him for months, nothing really serious, but a great nuisance at this moment. He was afraid of having to postpone the wedding. I wish it was well over; I rather shudder at the prospect of the tenants' dinner and the dance in the barn and all the rest of it. But here we are talking of the outer world again; this will never do. How did I come to drag Ernest in here? Oh, it was the relationship. Yes, Cousin Ulrica, I have every hope that when we come to know each other a little better you will allow me to make use of the privileges of your father's cousin.'

It was difficult to find a reply that would fit the occasion exactly, so that Ulrica, determined though she was that it should be 'No,' had yet to content herself with not saying 'Yes.'

CHAPTER XII.

LEARNING TO PLAY.

THE *Stellwagen* which left Glockenau that evening did not bear back Sir Gilbert Nevyll into the outer world, and even on the next day, and on the day after that again, that ancient yellow vehicle lumbered out of Glockenau empty, or at the most containing some unmistakably rustic specimen of humanity.

The natural excitement which the sudden appearance of her English cousin had brought to Ulrica had long since calmed down, giving way to a certain strange sensation of restfulness, such as she had never hitherto known. Firmly resolved though she was not to grasp the helping hand stretched towards her, yet it afforded her a curiously illogical satisfaction to tell herself that the helping hand was there, close by. She had never, even in her earliest childhood, known what it was to lean on any support. No one could have leant on so soft a substance as Fanny Eldringen, *née* Badl, while as for her father, he had leant on her. And to this new moral support she had a certain right which no one could take from her, 'for he is my cousin,' she said to herself exultingly. Her loneliness was at an end; when the two walked through the village together her heart beat proudly; to each woman who nodded to her out of her doorway, with her husband or her brother or her father or her children beside her, Ulrica felt inclined to say: 'Look at me, I also have someone who belongs to me; I also, like you, know what it is to have relations in the world; I am no longer the solitary outcast of society.'

To the Glockenauers, the tall Englishman with the Ollendorffian German and the universally courteous manner had within a few days become a familiar figure. The general opinion in the village was that since he seemed in some way to belong to the Grafen he must necessarily be a Graf, and the openness of his purse supported this idea. The children soon found out that to lie in wait for the Graf at some convenient corner was an agreeable as well as a profitable occupation, and the landlady of the 'Golden Sun' began to ask herself to which saint's image she should burn a blessed candle in thanksgiving for the unexpected piece of luck which had befallen her house.

That impression which Ulrica had gathered from Sir Gilbert's letters, the impression that he was not a happy man, that there lay some shadow on his life which darkened for him the glory of his riches and his position, was deepened by her intercourse with him. A man to whose temperament gaiety was more akin than gravity, whom nature had intended to be exceptionally happy, but whom circumstances had saddened and somewhat embittered—this was what he appeared to be. The struggle between these two extremes was continually to be read in his face; in the genial smile that would be so quickly chased by a shadow, conjured up, it would seem, by some sudden recollection; in the laugh, almost boyish in its brightness, which was so apt to end in a sigh; in the humourous twinkle which would shine in his eyes even while words of bitter cynicism were dropping from his lips. If he was a sufferer from '*Weltschmerz*'—and in his cynical moments he would mockingly range himself in that category—he at least differed in this one point from the mass of those unprofitable sufferers, in that he seemed anxious not to inflict his grievance upon unoffending fellow-creatures. When in the course of a conversation he seemed in danger of drifting into too low-spirited a view of life in general, it was frequently to be observed that he would both physically and mentally give himself a shake, as though to clear away the cobwebs of despondency and force himself to a brighter view of things. At such moments there would be a touch of recklessness about his gaiety which convinced Ulrica,

even more certainly than the gloomy fits had done, that her cousin Gilbert was for some reason or other to be pitied.

Meanwhile the object which had brought Sir Gilbert to this pine-scented retreat showed no symptoms of approaching fulfilment. By however many and various ways he approached the subject of Ulrica's future and the manner in which it was to be bettered, he found each way mercilessly barred. Why should she not give up Glockenau and come to live in England? he had suggested on one occasion. He was sure he could find her some occupation.

'And I am sure you would not,' said Ulrica, with a superior smile. 'You know about as much of occupations and the earning of money generally as I know of the London season. No, thank you; I may occasionally be hungry here in Glockenau, but, at least, I am independent; how do I know what I should be in England?'

Another time Sir Gilbert had unfolded a proposition over the maturing of which he had spent the best half of a sleepless night.

'I have hit upon a splendid idea,' he had greeted Ulrica with in the morning; 'if only the new priest proves manageable it will work splendidly. *I* shall take the lease of the farm and the cows and all that, and *you* will manage it for me. It will be the same arrangement as in the time of the old priest, only that we must start the thing this time on rather a larger scale, it would be ever so much more profitable. There must be more cows and of course, therefore, more people to look after them; and some of them might look after you as well—I mean that there might be one to peel the potatoes and another to black the boots.'

'And one to brush my hair and one to announce my visitors,' completed Ulrica, with a laugh. 'What put this idea into your head?' and she looked at him scrutinisingly.

'Well, you see, I have been looking out for a new investment lately,' said Sir Gilbert, somewhat shamefacedly, 'and it struck me that this would be a splendid way of—'

'Of making a provision for me under the mask of a

profitable laying-out of your money? No, Cousin Gilbert, you are a great deal too transparent to deceive me. You don't care two straws either for the investment or the profit, you have more money already than you know what to do with. *I will not* take your alms, under whatever name you may give them.'

'And *I will not* stand by and look on while you are working yourself to death by attempting to accomplish what it would take a couple of kitchen drudges and half a dozen day-labourers to accomplish comfortably.'

It was on the tip of Ulrica's tongue to tell him that there was no need for him to look on any longer at that distasteful spectacle, since the *Stellwagen* left Glockenau every evening at six; but for some reason or other she kept the idea to herself. Perhaps she was not prepared so quickly to give up the new acquisition she had made in the shape of a cousin; at any rate, she contented herself with shrugging her shoulders and going on with the hoeing of one of the resuscitated garden-beds with which she was busied at the moment.

She had heard much the same sentiment expressed by poor Franzl at the inn, yet the words sounded different coming from Gilbert Nevyll's lips. His horror, no doubt, was deeper than Franzl's horror had been. Never before had he been called upon to watch the hand-to-hand fight with starvation from so close a point. He had, indeed, known that poverty existed in the world, but hitherto his knowledge of it had been more theoretical than practical; it was something too distant and dim to be thoroughly comprehended, something that lay such poles asunder from what he personally knew of life, that he had serious difficulties in realising its exact nature. Now for the first time he was studying it close.

It had come to be a distinct though tacit struggle between the cousins, he determined to help, she equally determined not to be helped, and in this way there had passed a whole week, and the *Stellwagen* had not yet borne him from the valley, and the landlady of the 'Golden Sun' still burnt candles before the images of her patron saint.

The restoration of the Marienhof, such primitive and

partial restoration as Ulrica could dare to undertake, was gradually progressing.

'Ah, if you could have seen it as it was!' she said, as she looked around at the devastated ground, now indeed cleared of bricks and blown-down trees, yet bearing only a melancholy resemblance to the prosperous Marienhof of two months ago.

'Why should it not be again as it was?' Sir Gilbert replied on this occasion.

'I wonder when the new priest will be appointed?' said Ulrica, with prompt evasion, recognising the approach of the dangerous subject.

It was one afternoon at the end of Sir Gilbert's first week in the valley, while they were sitting on the bench beside the door, a new bench, for the old one had been washed away by the flood, that these remarks were made. Sir Gilbert was smoking a Havana cigar, Ulrica was darning a duster. When a few minutes before she had stepped out of the house with the torn duster in her hand, Sir Gilbert had stared in bewilderment at the enigmatical rag.

'What *is* it?' he inquired, eying the linen square with a mixture of astonishment and disgust.

'A duster. You look as if you had never seen a duster.'

In point of fact he was not sure that he ever had; he knew only that there were such things, that there must be such things, from the spotless purity of the mahogany at Morton Hall.

'What can be the fun of working at such a hideous rag?' he observed after a minute, during which he had been watching the diminishing of the hole in the duster with a look of deep dissatisfaction.

'I don't do it for fun.'

'Why do you do it at all? No, don't answer me, don't tell me that if you didn't mend your own dusters they would have to remain unmented; it's all perfectly true, mercilessly true, I know it; the logic of it is unanswerable; but in Heaven's name, do let us throw logic to the winds for once; put away that detestable piece of linen and let me see you sitting with your hands in your lap, doing

nothing, wasting your time comfortably like other people—only for once, Cousin Ulrica!’

He spoke so vehemently that she looked up in surprise. She saw that his face was troubled in a way she had never before observed.

‘But I am not tired, why should I take a rest?’

‘Lay it down, Ulrica, I beg of you to lay it down.’ It sounded more like a command than an entreaty, and Ulrica in her astonishment mechanically obeyed.

‘Thank you,’ he said, more quietly, having stood for a minute looking at her. ‘I cannot tell you how much good it does me to see you for once with idle hands. Why, even a day-labourer’s life is not all work, even he has his hours of play.’

Ulrica had put down the duster on the bench beside her. She had not yet recovered from her astonishment at her cousin, and more still at herself, for she could not remember ever before having done a thing simply because she had been ordered to. She pulled her thimble off her finger and tried it upon each of her fingers in turn, dropped it to the ground and picked it up again, clasped and unclasped her hands in a restless, undecided manner, tore off a vine leaf from the wall beside her and pricked a pattern on it with her needle; finally she threw away the vine leaf and turned to Sir Gilbert.

‘It is no use,’ she said, with a laugh that was almost comical in its helplessness. ‘I cannot sit with my hands idle; I must be at work, I have never learnt how to play.’

‘You will learn. Promise me that you will try, that you will begin to try while I am here?’

‘While you are here, if you will have it, yes; but after you are gone—’

Ulrica stopped short for an instant, somewhat dismayed at herself. The question as to what the valley would be like after her cousin was gone had suddenly flashed into her mind. Would the loneliness come back again? She distinctly foresaw that the loneliness would be all the lonelier for the interruption that had been.

‘After you are gone I shall have to work all the harder.’ Ulrica finished her phrase somewhat hurriedly.

‘There’s a good deal of unmixed selfishness in the matter,’ Sir Gilbert was saying. ‘To see you forever in motion oppresses me with a sense of my own utter uselessness. It’s a sensation that I have to suffer under a good deal as it is. I give you my word that I have days in which I feel ashamed of looking my butler or my gardener in the face; they at least fulfil a distinct object. I don’t suppose either of them is ever exercised in his mind as to the question of whether life is worth living. The one lays the dinner-table and the other looks after his vineries and peach-houses—but I? What do I do? I don’t even eat the peaches, because I don’t happen to care for peaches. And where’s the remedy? I can’t turn myself into a butler or a gardener, and if I did what would be the object gained? To begin with, nobody would believe I was sane; I should find my way into a straight-jacket without fail.’

‘And how very badly the dinner-table would be laid,’ remarked Ulrica, ‘and what a terrible mess you would make of the peach-houses.’

‘And then,’ said Sir Gilbert, making a face, ‘I can’t help fancying that the chairs in the servants’ hall must be uncomfortable; and the under-gardeners would be sure to have all sorts of unpleasant habits, such as smoking cheap tobacco, which is a thing I positively cannot stand; and then I am not absolutely convinced that they all possess pocket-handkerchiefs. No, I am afraid I wouldn’t do for either situation. Sometimes I have thought that it wouldn’t be a bad plan to run away from my money; you must admit, at least, that the idea has the merit of originality—people often run away from their creditors or their wives, but not generally from their money. I should take the first ship to Australia with perhaps five pounds in my pocket, and then just make a hit out for it and see whether my arms are not as strong and my head as tough as that of the run of my fellow-creatures. But no,’ Sir Gilbert shook his head, ‘that would be no good either; the money would be there, even though I had run away from it; the idea of it alone would paralyse me. I should be haunted by the nonsensical uselessness of the thing. The very first

time I had to do without a salt-spoon or put on a pair of ready-made boots I know that I should infallibly telegraph home for my passage money.'

'I don't understand you,' said Ulrica; 'you are not quite serious, of course, but I don't think either that you are quite joking.'

'Upon my word,' continued Sir Gilbert, unheeding, 'the only radical remedy I can think of would be to turn all I have into banknotes, make the banknotes up into neat packets with a stone in each packet, and then drop them quietly over the side of London bridge. The ships would be burnt then, and no mistake.'

'Surely,' said Ulrica gravely, 'you might find a better employment for your money than merely to startle the fishes with it. Think, for instance, how much a single one of those packets could do for Glockenau!'

'In your hands, you mean, not in mine. I wouldn't have a notion how to set about it. I can't speak the language, for one thing.'

'Well, then, not in Glockenau. Poverty and sickness are surely weeds that grow everywhere.'

'They grow very plentifully in Dark Street,' said Sir Gilbert, deliberately and somewhat grimly.

'Dark Street? What is that?'

'It is some houses which belong to me somewhere in London, and they are all crammed full of poor people, I believe.'

'You believe? You do not know?'

'Oh, if it comes to that, I suppose I do know. They are regular fever-courts, the sort of holes that the pluckiest bobbies are shy of.'

'Do you mean that you have never even been there?'

'Been there? No. That would be rather too sensational, and there's nothing I detest like sensationalism. I'm not quite sure that I would have the face to give a cabman the address. I just do as everybody does, I employ agents.'

'And can you trust the agents?'

'Well, I don't suppose they pocket more than about half the money that goes through their hands, and there is

always the other half to fall back upon, you know. I am being continually badgered about doors and windows and grates and staircases, so what else can I do but send an agent to Dark Street?’

‘You might do a good many other things, I think. You might pull down the houses, for instance, and build cleaner and better houses in their place.’

‘No good; I’ve thought of all that. What’s the use of making one street decent when you can’t even reach it except through the most disreputable highways? What respectable folk would set themselves down right in the middle of that hot-bed of vice?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Ulrica reflectively, ‘but I can’t help fancying that the respectability would spread. I have often noticed that every signal improvement which I undertook on the Marienhof was immediately copied in the village. No one had ever thought of having a door-mat until I invested in one for the saving of my floor, and the Distelbauer had been quite satisfied to let his hens have the run of the house until he found out that mine were never allowed to cross the threshold. Who knows what the other streets might not do for themselves if your street set the example.’

‘Do you think so? That idea has never occurred to me.’

‘And even if the old houses remain,’ continued Ulrica, ‘could they not be improved by better management? Why can’t you get people to do it for you?’

‘I have tried that too, but it is no good. When I was still young and foolish enough to cherish ideals, I had a scheme for making Dark Street respectable; it was one of my grand failures; I have had several. The people into whose hands I put the matter used it as a money speculation. They thought I was a philanthropical fool whom rational folk had a right to squeeze; and upon my word,’ said Sir Gilbert, with a sudden reckless laugh, ‘I don’t see that they were wrong. Is not every one a fool who worries over the inevitable? As long as the world stands there will be misery and drunkenness and thievishness in plenty; what business is it of *mine*? Why should *I* feel

responsible for the people who happen to pay me rent? They have their parsons and their priests to preach to them, let them listen to them. Why should I enjoy my slice of roast pheasant one whit the less at dinner because some dozen old women in Dark Street go hungry to bed? It is Fate that is to blame, not I. I did not choose my lot, it was chosen for me. All the better for me, all the worse for those who have drawn the short end; it is they who are in the wrong and I in the right. Let them starve if they are hungry, let them freeze if they are cold, let them go to the gallows if they have been so badly brought up that they don't know right from wrong. It is not my business. Life is too short to be poisoned by such fine-drawn scruples—how do I know how much longer I shall live? Why should I not enjoy every hour I have? They were right, those who labelled me a fool, yes, they were quite right. To enjoy, to enjoy and once more to enjoy, it is the only true philosophy of life.'

He had risen from the bench while he spoke, and stood before Ulrica with a flush upon his face. She had never seen him like this before, and looked at him in astonishment; there were moments in which she did not know what to make of her cousin Gilbert.

'You do not mean that,' she said after a pause, during which he had stood staring moodily out over the plain and towards the sunset sky. At the sound of her voice he turned. The excitement had died out of his face.

'God help me, no, I don't mean it,' he said, in a different tone; 'I have tried often enough to persuade myself that I do. I shall try again, I know I shall, when I am away from this valley, back among the old surroundings, and perhaps I shall succeed then, when you are not there to contradict me,' he ended, with a rather uncertain smile.

'Have you no one to contradict you at home?'

'No one. People with so much money as I have are never contradicted. I wonder whether anything could have been made of me if I had? He bent down suddenly and took her hand. 'Ulrica,' he said hurriedly, 'why are you not my sister?'

'Your sister?' repeated Ulrica, slowly drawing away

her hand. 'Yes, to be sure, why am I not your sister?' and she laughed without exactly knowing why. The idea of being Sir Gilbert Nevyll's sister struck her as almost ludicrously incongruous. A faint chill had come over her spirit, a chill which she would not acknowledge and which she would not have known how to explain. Was it not only last week that she herself had claimed Sir Gilbert as a brother?

'You might have helped me, Ulrica. You would have taught me how to work, and I would have taught you how to play.'

'Which reminds me that I have been playing too long,' said Ulrica, rising from the bench. 'It is nearly supper-time.' and she disappeared into the house.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LANDLADY'S BENCHES.

'Is it permitted?'

Ulrica turned round with a start at sound of these words spoken in an inquiring tone.

In the open doorway, with a basket on her arm and a cotton umbrella in her hand, stood the landlady of the 'Golden Sun.'

'You are busy, perhaps,' suggested the landlady.

'Yes—no, oh no, I am not busy at all,' stammered Ulrica, almost guiltily, hastily flinging aside some small object she had been holding in her hand, and advancing towards her visitor.

In point of fact she had been busy, but not in the usual way. She had not been either sweeping or scrubbing or cooking; the object she had thrown aside was neither a duster nor a soup-ladle, it was a faded red ribbon which she had found at the bottom of her box, and the article which had engaged her attention when the landlady en-

tered had been—her mirror. Her black silk handkerchief lay on the table, leaving uncovered the wealth of her shining brown hair. She put up her hand uneasily, conscious of the old woman's gaze, and provoked with herself for her own childishness. What had come over her to be wasting her time in this fashion instead of looking after the kitchen fire, which should have been lit an hour ago?

'Have you anything to say to me?' she inquired, somewhat curtly.

'It suits you much better that way,' remarked the landlady, eying Ulrica sharply. 'No one knows how much hair you have if you hide it beneath the handkerchief. Ah, and a ribbon!' as her quick eye detected the strip of red on the table; 'that must look well among your plaits. Hm, hm, yes, that tallies.'

'If you have anything to say I wish you would say it quickly. I have not got time to be standing here talking.'

'But you have got time to be putting ribbons in your hair? Yes, that tallies exactly. Oh, you needn't be afraid, I won't keep you long. It is a remark, or perhaps I should say a request, I have to make. I thought I should step in now, since I was passing this way.'

The landlady advanced some steps further into the room and looked cautiously around her. 'It was to ask you whether you couldn't get the matter to last till at least the end of the month?'

'What matter?' asked Ulrica, staring.

'The *Graf*. You see it isn't often that the 'Golden Sun' has such a chance as that; the best bedroom occupied and two eggs to breakfast every day, and butter and white bread; why, these ten days have brought enough to do up the bar-room with a complete set of new tables, and I have calculated that if he stops for only eight days more I shall be able to get new benches to match.'

'But what do you want me to do?' asked Ulrica, beginning to laugh. 'I am sure I don't grudge you your benches, but how am I to procure them for you?'

'Just by holding back a little, by not letting him have his way just yet.'

‘Who? Whose way? What are you talking about?’

‘Holy Saint Barbara! Why is it that all young women nowadays have got to be spoken to so plainly before they understand a thing? Whom am I talking about? Oh, the holy innocence! Why, of your lover, to be sure!’

Ulrica stood for a minute quite still, regarding her visitor almost blankly. Then all at once the blood rushed into her cheeks.

‘I have no lover!’ she said vehemently. She had advanced a step towards the landlady, and her hands closed as though she was going to strike her.

‘No offence, no offence at all meant,’ said the old woman quickly, retreating a little nearer to the door, for she was a small woman, and Ulrica, with her flaming eyes and her clenched hands, was a formidable figure. ‘I did not intend any harm; I have no doubt that it is all straight and honourable, and that he intends to make you his wife. I do not grudge you your good luck, though, by rights, I ought to hate you, for it is your doing that my Franzl went back to the soldiers and that Mirzl has got married to that goggle-eyed Michl. But I don’t believe you meant it, oh no; you have seen hard times enough, young though you be; and no doubt you will suit him better than you would have suited my Franzl; he will have his puddings cooked properly, at any rate; oh, I know what you are worth! All I should like to ask of you would be just to hold back a little. After all, though I did have to give you such short notice, I did you more than one good turn when you first came to the village, so you need not grudge paying me a good turn back. It is only eight days that I stipulate for, so just hold back a little. Now that ribbon, for instance, I am not quite satisfied about that ribbon; men are such touch-and-go creatures, a trifle like that might hurry on matters too fast; as long as *he* is not sure of *you*, I am sure of *him*, don’t you see? While, when once the matter is settled, how do I know that he will not be carrying you away to I don’t know where?’

Ulrica was standing rigid beside the table, her head held high, her lips curved in a scornful smile.

‘You are completely mistaken,’ she said, as the landlady

paused to draw breath. 'This gentleman has not come here either to make love to me or to marry me. He came because he thought he could help me. He is my cousin.' The words were pronounced with an accent which was calculated to crush the landlady, but they entirely missed their effect. She broke into a shrill laugh.

'Your cousin! Holy Saint Barbara, as if that were an obstacle! Is not the Apfelbauer cousin to his wife, and is not my own husband first cousin to me? He has come here to help you! Oh, Holy Saint Barbara! And he stays here, I suppose, because the air is so good, and the grass so green, not because your lips are red and your neck white—a fine gentleman like that, who might be dining off silver plates every day, no doubt. Oh, you are the one to teach me how to know men! As if they were not all alike, whether they walk behind the plough or ride in a coach! I am an old woman and I have seen much, you can believe me. If the Graf has not made love to you yet, it will not be long in coming. A young man and a young woman passing their days together—not that he is so over-young either, and not that I ever thought you nearly so good-looking as Mirzl, but still you are young and he is not old. It is the way of all things, he cannot escape. It must happen just as a stone that falls into the water must go to the bottom.'

'Leave me this instant, I will not listen to one word more!' cried Ulrica, stamping with her foot on the ground. 'You have no right to speak in this way, I do not believe a word you say; leave me at once!'

The landlady beat an instant retreat towards the door, awed by the imperiousness of the tone, but before retiring finally she could not resist putting in her head once more and whispering:

'When the time *does* come, remember that I was a good mistress to you, and do not forget about the ben—'

The word was cut short in the middle, for Ulrica had made another threatening step forwards, and the landlady's petticoats whisked round the corner.

The interview had not lasted over five minutes, but it had been long enough to destroy Ulrica's peace. Her

heart was hot with indignation. How was it that officious interference must forever be poisoning the simplest and purest pleasures of life? These last days had been so happy, so unlike anything that had ever been before, she had felt so free and yet so safe under the protection of her cousin—why must this detestable woman come here to startle her with her odious insinuations? How was it that no vulgar mind could ever be got to grasp the real meaning of disinterested friendship? But she was wrong; that woman was quite wrong. ‘He has not made love to me,’ said Ulrica between her teeth, ‘he is not thinking of such a thing. It was only three days ago that he called me his sister.’ And she bit her lip and uttered a quick exclamation. She had spilled upon her hand some drops of the hot soup she was stirring. It seemed to Ulrica as though a rough hand had torn aside a curtain which had hung before her eyes veiling something vague and disquieting, something at which she had not yet gained courage to look.

Gradually, as the first heat of her indignation cooled down, one phrase seemed to stand out clear among all the flood of words that had streamed from the landlady’s lips. The woman was in the wrong, clearly in the wrong—as yet, but how about the future? What was that that she had said? ‘He cannot escape; it must happen, just as a stone that is thrown into the water must go to the bottom.’ The words were continually in her ears, they followed her wherever she went.

‘She has spoilt everything,’ said Ulrica. She told herself that all her pleasure in her cousin Gilbert’s society was gone forever, and it was some days before she began to discover that this was not true, that the landlady’s visit had not in reality spoilt anything, that everything was as it had been before.

And yet not just as it had been. There was a difference, it lay she knew not where. She had been happy before this in those walks and those talks in which the interest of her life was at present centred; she was no less happy now, but it was a happiness into which a thrill of excitement had entered unawares, a deeper if more troubled de-

light. She did not stop to analyse its cause, she was content to enjoy each day as it came.

And how full these days were, how like each other in their even flow, yet how different in their innumerable small details. There were the hours spent in the dairy, when Gilbert lounged against the doorpost or sat down on an overturned milkpail and watched Ulrica moving about among the red earthenware dishes, skimming the milk or measuring out the cream. There were the walks in the forest, the visits to the peasant huts, on which Sir Gilbert now always accompanied his cousin. Then there were the rainy afternoons when it was not possible to put a foot out of the Stube, and the early autumn evenings when a fire crackled in the big green stove and the *Ofenbank* became by common consent the seat of honour. Among her father's possessions Ulrica had found an English translation of Schiller, which still bore on its title page the name of his mother, Edith Nevyll, and which by some miracle had survived all Emil Eldringen's wanderings. She had not opened it for years, but now the shabby red volume was unearthed, and she would sit for hours listening to 'Wallenstein' or 'Maria Stuart,' while from time to time Sir Gilbert would lay the open book upon his knee and the subject would be discussed, gravely or gaily, hotly or coolly, just as the mood of reader or listener brought it about.

In the morning she looked for his coming with a longing that grew ever greater. She no longer spoke of a waste of time when he suggested a walk in the forest; her work even stood neglected. She was enjoying the first holiday she had ever taken in her life, and it was strange to observe how this sudden relaxation of an effort which had been almost constant showed its influence on her outward appearance. There had always been a touch of hardness about her beauty, a something of asperity, the result of the defensive attitude which circumstances had forced her to assume. It was her womanhood which was her greatest danger and the greatest obstacle to her success in life, therefore she had not dared to let herself be quite a woman. 'She is a man,' the Glockenauers had

often said of her, wonderingly, when she had given some new proof of moral determination or physical courage. They did not say so now; they felt, without being able to put into words, the change which had come over the Grafin. It was now only that her beauty reached its height, as it was now only that she rejoiced in its possession.

'I am glad that I am beautiful,' she would say, as she smiled at herself in the little dim mirror in its clumsy frame. 'I am glad that I am young.' Sometimes she would look at her hands and wonder whether anything could make them perfectly white again, like the hands of the young ladies who were 'so particular' about them, as her cousin Gilbert had said. Unconsciously, and almost unobserved by herself, she knotted her black silk handkerchief more loosely, allowing the waves of her magnificent hair to be visible. Her beauty was no longer to be hidden as a thing she was ashamed of, it had broken its bonds at last.

There were moments when she would be frightened at herself, when she indistinctly recognised upon how uncertain a basis this new happiness was built. But these were only brief awakenings.

The landlady's words would return to her memory—since it must happen 'as surely as a stone which is thrown into the water must drop to the bottom,' of what use was it to struggle against Fate? And she would sink back again into the dream which was slowly absorbing her life.

Three weeks had thus passed and Sir Gilbert was still in the valley. He seemed to have forgotten that there was an outer world. Was he, too, dreaming a dream? It was hard to say. The landlady herself, though she studied his face night and morning and watched him when he started for the Marienhof and when he returned from there, felt her shrewd head puzzled. She had seen many courtships in her day, but as for this one—if indeed it were one—she could not take upon herself to say how it would end. He did not to her mind look like a lover who foresees success, but neither did he look like one who is preparing himself for failure. Was he a lover at all? she asked herself occasionally. Some of the symptoms indeed would have

tallied fairly well; there were occasional signs of restlessness; twice in the course of these three weeks he had begun to pack his portmanteau, and twice the portmanteau had been unpacked again and things had gone on as before. The landlady was sure of her benches for the bar-room now, and was beginning to dream of a new set of beer-glasses. There was no saying how long this state of things might not last, for the Graf seemed like a man who is walking in his sleep, drifting unconsciously onwards without any active exercise of will.

But it was written in the stars that the landlady was not to have her beer-glasses. It lies in the nature of things to be forever progressing towards collapse. Left to themselves, matters might have trailed on thus for who knows how many weeks more; but in this world of chances and accidents matters never are left to themselves.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

ONE day in the very end of September, Ulrica and her cousin were standing together deep in the forest. They had been walking for some time, neither of them distinctly aware of how long, and now the blaze of sunset which was lighting up the western sky warned them that it was time to be thinking of the homeward way. It had been a day of alternate sunshine and showers, of smiles and tears, and even now, in this sunset hour, the smiling and the tearful mood were still struggling for the upper hand. It was hard to say which would gain the victory, whether the night would be fair or wet.

Ulrica looked round her with a start; the part of the forest they had reached was strange to her. During these last weeks she had got to know the woods close to Glockenau pretty thoroughly, but they had never wandered so far

as this. They had left home early in the afternoon, lured out by one of the deceptive intervals of sunshine, and had been walking ever since, taking shelter under some dense pine trees from the light showers which occasionally drifted across the sky, and so deep in a variety of discussions which followed one another that neither marked the path they were following.

'I want you to make me a promise,' Ulrica had said, soon after they had entered the shadow of the pine trees.

'Well?'

'I want you to promise that the first thing you do when next you are in London shall be to visit Dark Street.'

'It will be no good.'

'Perhaps not, but I want you to promise all the same. I believe it will make you happier even only to try.'

'Why should you care whether I am happy or not?' he asked, almost harshly.

She glanced up at him in surprise. Once or twice before she had heard him speak in this tone without being able to recognise any cause for the seeming irritation.

'Do you promise?' was all she said.

'Yes,' said Sir Gilbert, and then immediately began to talk of other things.

And in this way they had unawares got deeper and deeper into the forest, until the level rays of the setting sun shooting straight into Ulrica's eyes called her back to the actual surroundings of the moment.

Where were they? Ulrica recognised nothing around her. One pine tree indeed is very like another, and shut in as they now were by the black giants of the forest, it was possible that Glockenau lay close at hand, if only they could gain an open spot from whence to take their bearings. There to the right the trees appeared to be lightening, and an abrupt falling away of the ground suggested the ending of the forest. They turned their steps in that direction and at the end of a few minutes were standing on the edge of a valley which sloped away at their feet.

'Surely those are houses,' said Ulrica, shading her eyes with her hand. In the grassy hollow down below dark blocks stood about which, in the uncertain light, might

have passed for huts. Were not those their moss-grown roofs and was not that the blue smoke curling from their chimneys? That patch of waving green, how like it was to half-ripe wheat, only that wheat is not half ripe in September; those gleams of white under the trees, did they not irresistibly suggest a family washing-day? It wanted but the bark of a dog to make the illusion complete. The whole bore a fantastic, phantom-like appearance of habitation which it took a steady gaze to dispel. The would-be huts were nothing but fragments of rock dotting the floor of the valley; the smoke was but the chill haze of the autumn evening gathering round them in the hollow; the wheat was overgrown grass; the gleams of white were the shining birch-stems. The valley was pathless and silent. It was with a shock of surprise that the solitude here proclaimed itself. The very suggestion of a human presence made the real loneliness all the more palpable.

‘One thing is quite certain,’ said Ulrica, ‘we have lost our way.’

And as she spoke the blaze of sunset was roughly extinguished under a heavy cloud and something pattered softly in the branches overhead. The question as to the fair or the rainy night was decided now without doubt.

Clearly there was no time to be lost, and calculating their direction as best they could by the position of the setting sun, they set out again at a brisker pace. The valley was traversed, and once more they plunged into the forest on the other side. A short cut home might be effected this way, at least so Ulrica had calculated, but soon doubts began to assail her. Opening after opening showed itself in the forest, only to close again and shut them in once more in the dense blackness of pine trees. Time after time they seemed to be gaining some height from whence a comprehensive view of the country might be obtained, and when the height was reached there was another beyond, and beyond that another and another in despairing succession.

Meanwhile it was raining steadily and hard. Before they had walked for an hour the ground had grown perilously slippery, and with every minute darkness was increasing the difficulty.

‘It looks like a case of “babes in the woods,”’ remarked Sir Gilbert presently. From time to time he looked at his watch; after the first two or three times he had to strike a match to do so. Seven o’clock, eight, nine, and still no lightening of the trees, no end to the forest. Silence had long ago fallen between them, broken only occasionally by some remark of Sir Gilbert’s. He was walking beside Ulrica now. A minute ago she had stumbled and all but fallen.

‘Take my arm,’ he said to her.

‘It is not necessary,’ said Ulrica. ‘I can walk alone, I am so strong.’

‘That may be, but I am stronger.’ And without further parley he took her hand and drew it within his arm; presently he broke a branch from a tree, snapped off the smaller twigs and put it into her hand: ‘That will do for the other side,’ he remarked.

Ulrica submitted in silence. Her aching feet were beginning to drag painfully, her temples throbbed with the continued exertion, and yet she was praying in her heart that the end of the forest might never come. It is true that she was strong, but for this very reason it seemed like a luxury to be weak for once. At one place there was a stream to cross, and he lifted her from one stone to the other as though she had been a child. After a time he noticed that her teeth were chattering with the cold, for she had started from the Marienhof in her indoor costume, and had long since been drenched to the skin. ‘I am sorry I have nothing better,’ said Sir Gilbert, as he took off his coat and wrapped it round her. A faint protest rose to her lips, but he silenced it on the instant. He was not given to catching colds, he said cheerfully, and he did not wish to be answerable for her suicide.

It was close to ten o’clock when out of the blackness of a wooded hollow below them a yellow light gleamed suddenly, like a star fallen to the earth. It disappeared and reappeared and sunk into the ground and started up again on the most unexpected spot, after the tantalising manner of such beacon-lights, and altogether played Will-o’-the-Wisp to the best of its ability. Fortunately it could not

keep up the part for long, seeing that it was no Will-o'-the-Wisp, but a most prosaic petroleum lamp standing at that moment on a remarkably solid and not in the least ghostlike wooden table. The antlers above the door as well as the avalanche of Dachshund puppies which greeted Ulrica and Sir Gilbert on the threshold loudly proclaimed the forester's dwelling. The forester himself came to the door in answer to Sir Gilbert's knock. There was no need of explanation or appeals; the situation explained itself. Nor were they solitary in their misfortune, for on entering the warmed and lighted room whence the soft tones of a zither were stealing forth, every seat was found to be occupied by refugees who were obviously in the same plight as themselves. Five or six ladies and as many gentlemen, in fashionable attire but in a somewhat draggled condition, were gathered round the table, doing their best not to look too obviously bored by the succession of *Volkslieder* which a sturdy youth in the grey and green forester's garb was bashfully yet perseveringly eliciting from his zither. Wet umbrellas stood about in the corners with little pools of water gathering around them. Upon chairs and benches pushed up to the gigantic stove, jackets, hats, coats, scarfs, all in a uniformly moist condition, were artistically disposed. A picnic party caught in the rain was written in large letters over the whole group. The ladies' hair was out of curl, the gentlemen's collars were limp. Ribbons were discoloured and frills flattened, everything that was meant to rustle now at most feebly flapped, everything that had once stood up crisply now hung down in deep dejection.

There were more antlers on the wall here, some stuffed birds on a shelf, and in one corner a well-filled gun-rack. Of Dachshund puppies there seemed to be an unlimited supply; they appeared out of every corner, romped noisily with some unfortunate hat or glove which had slipped from its position on the drying-ground beside the stove, and seemed to take a special delight in tripping up every moist excursionist who unwarily left his place.

It was no surprise to Ulrica and Sir Gilbert to hear that they were so many miles from Glockenau, that the return

could not be thought of before morning. After the dripping forest even a wooden bench was luxury, and being the last arrivals and consequently the wettest, the kindly forester steered them to the seats nearest the stove, from which some of the half-dried articles of attire were rapidly removed.

It was some time before the chill began to leave Ulrica's veins and the first intolerable sensation of fatigue passed away. A cup of hot coffee administered by the forester's wife revived her so far that she began to feel some faint curiosity with regard to their fellow-sufferers. They belonged to a world which she had abandoned long ago; she had even forgotten that such a world existed so close to Glockenau. She turned her head and scanned the group round the table with a certain interest. There was no mistaking the stamp its different members bore. Draggled though the *toilettes* were, they were undoubtedly *toilettes*, not mere dresses.

Even the tone of the voices and even the turns of head and tricks of manner carried Ulrica back in memory to that torturing yet dazzling afternoon which she had spent in the Villa Flora. Here were a couple of red-haired girls, who, but for their red hair, might have been taken for diluted copies of the two young Countesses Tiefenthal; here was a portly matron who unmistakably belonged to the Countess Minart order of women, and here—what was this? Ulrica turned abruptly away from her scrutiny of the group. She had met the free-and-easy gaze of a pair of black eyes which somehow or other seemed familiar to her. Surely she had seen that face before, yes, and seen it in the Villa Flora. It took her but a minute to recall the circumstances and to recognise the smooth-shaven features of Baron Bernersdorf. He on his side had obviously not yet recognised her, though by the puzzled expression of his face it was evident that he was questioning his memory. In that moment Ulrica blessed the disguising black silk handkerchief which of late had somehow lost its charm in her eyes. Vexation sent the blood to her forehead; she bit her lip till it bled. What capricious chance had landed Baron Bernersdorf of all people in the world in the very heart of this wilderness of forest?

'Is anything wrong?' inquired Sir Gilbert, noticing her change of expression.

'Nothing,' she answered hurriedly. 'I have had an unpleasant surprise, that is all.'

The two were sitting side by side, apart from the members of the picnic party, and except for the watchful gaze of Baron Bernersdorf, sublimely ignored by them, though in truth the curiosity of the young Countesses and Baronesses had been considerably aroused by the appearance of this oddly assorted couple, for Sir Gilbert was as unmistakably an Englishman as Ulrica, despite her dress, was unmistakably *not* a peasant.

Presently the voices at the other end of the room became more animated, there was a general pushing away of chairs and a scuffling of feet. The zither-playing youth, having exhausted his repertoire of *Volkslieder*, had struck the chords of the Blue Danube waltz. Some one let fall the word 'dancing,' and instantly the drooping spirits of the party revived. After all, what better way could there be of passing the long wet hours until the carriages which had been sent for could reach the forester's house? How could the failure of the picnic be more appropriately redeemed than by this rustic 'hop,' which presented such admirable opportunities for the taking up again of those threads of flirtation which the unwelcome rain had so woefully relaxed? These young ladies had come out on a picnic, not because they were particularly enthusiastic about either pine trees, or moss, or rocks, or mountain streams, but because the combination of these various things presented certain advantages not to be overlooked either by match-making mammas or by more or less youthful maidens anxious to be settled in life. If nothing else, they did as a background for the spick-and-span costume which is invariably donned for these occasions.

With one accord the young Countesses and Baronesses now threw off the oppression which the consciousness of their uncurled hair and their unpowdered cheeks had brought with it, and awoke to the fact that all was not yet lost. There was a hasty rearranging of folds and a universal brightening of eyes; the very frills seemed to be in-

fect by the general revival and to regain something of their starch. In five minutes' time the *improvisé* dance was in full swing. A single zither is indeed a somewhat meagre ballroom orchestra, but desperate people are not particular, and the young forester's fingers were for the next hour kept in pretty constant motion. The stuffed owls and hawks on the shelves stared down in surprise with their round glass eyes at the goings-on at their feet, and from time to time the yelps of some Dachshund puppy whose tail had got into the way of one of the dancers was heard above the zither music.

A minute ago Sir Gilbert had crossed the room to where their host sat, in order to borrow a light for his cigar. Ulrica sat alone in her corner beside the stove, when suddenly she was aware of a shadow beside her.

'I think you have dropped your handkerchief,' drawled a voice she remembered.

She turned sharply round and found herself face to face with Baron Bernersdorf. He was holding towards her a delicate scrap of lace which certainly was *not* her handkerchief, but which gave him as good an excuse as any other for satisfying his curiosity by a nearer view of her face. It was evident that, until this moment, he had been puzzled; now, as he riveted his eyes upon her, Ulrica read recognition in the sudden smile of enlightenment which played round his lips. He was about to speak again, to claim acquaintance no doubt, but at that moment he glanced past Ulrica, made the ghost of a grimace, and, with a smooth bow, glided away among the dancers just as Sir Gilbert returned to his cousin's side.

Sir Gilbert's eyes followed Baron Bernersdorf with a look of surprise, and then returned to Ulrica's face.

'You seem to have found an acquaintance,' he observed, somewhat drily.

'It is only Baron Bernersdorf. I met him three years ago,' she hurriedly replied. The history of her acquaintance with the Baron would always remain one of the most disagreeable reminiscences of her early girlhood.

Sir Gilbert did not press his question further, but after another glance at her flushed face, on which disturbance

was clearly written, leant back in his seat and silently watched the dancers.

Ulrica had pulled her chair as far out of the way as possible, so that she sat somewhat in the rear of her cousin. She waited till she saw that his attention was engaged, then, softly rising from her seat, she stole from the room. Out in the dark passage she drew a breath of relief. She had nothing in common with that gay company in there; its pleasures were to her as unintelligible as its conversation. The revolving couples bewildered her, and the consciousness of Baron Bernersdorf's pursuing gaze disquieted her. She would look for a safer spot. A door stood half-open at the further end of the passage; she approached it and entered a dimly lighted space. It was the kitchen. Red embers still gleamed in the oven, and a tallow-candle on the table was burning to its end. Here there was peace and solitude, no whirling waltzers, and no yelping puppies, nothing but a sleepy white cat who came to rub herself drowsily against Ulrica's skirt. She sat down on a stool beside the table, the cat purred at her feet, the embers fell softly in the oven, and from the other end of the passage the laughing and talking and the zither music sounded in subdued confusion. Presently the purring and the zither-playing and the dropping of the embers seem to grow mixed and faint; Ulrica's arms were laid on the table and her head sank down upon them.

She had not dozed for more than two minutes when a sound in the room awakened her. She looked up with a start. On the other side of the table stood Baron Bernersdorf, his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed upon her face.

'That was a very good idea of yours,' he observed, with his impertinent smile. 'I was beginning to be afraid that I was not to have the chance of claiming acquaintance. If I were a little vainer than I am, I might even flatter myself that it is not to mere chance that I owe this charming *tête-à-tête*. Do you know that it took me quite half-an-hour to recognise you? That handkerchief did its best to baffle me; and then the unlikelihood of the thing. How could I foresee that a week's shooting in Toni Bellerth's *Jagd-*

schloss would end in a picnic, and that the picnic would end in a meeting with my fair acquaintance of the Helenenthal?’

It had taken Ulrica a minute to recover her senses. She saw that she had done a very foolish thing when she left the crowded room over there; there was nothing for it now but to convince Baron Bernersdorf with the least possible delay that it had not been done for his sake. Without making any answer she rose from her seat.

‘Don’t be in such a desperate hurry,’ said the Baron, with his hands still in his pockets. He stood so that in order to reach the door Ulrica would be forced to pass close by him. ‘I am tortured with curiosity; why this dress, and who is he—the lucky man, who appears to enjoy so large a share of your confidence?’

Ulrica was still standing beside the table; she faced Baron Bernersdorf with blazing eyes.

‘Take care what you are saying—Sir Gilbert Nevill is my cousin.’

‘Your cousin? Yet I have known you to show considerable mistrust of relations—witness my experience of three years ago. We are cousins as well, are we not, somehow or other?’

‘No, you are not my cousin, you cannot be,’ exclaimed Ulrica vehemently. The word applied to Baron Bernersdorf seemed like a desecration. ‘Let me pass. Three years ago I pitied you; if you do not want me to despise you as well, stand aside now and let me pass.’

Baron Bernersdorf was a great deal too experienced not to perceive at a glance that this was no sham retreat. The *tête-à-tête* with Ulrica would have amused him, but it was not worth the bother of a scandal. With a slight shrug he stood aside and Ulrica walked past him. She had not reached the door when she stood still with a shock of fear. In the doorway she had caught sight of a tall figure, a man with a pale face, on which violent emotion of some sort was written. It was her cousin Gilbert. She had seen him as in a vision; for one instant he had stood thus and then he was gone—gone, after having discovered her here with Baron Bernersdorf. He had looked so pale,

what could it mean? Was it possible that he had put upon her withdrawal from the other room the same construction that the Baron had thought fit to put upon it? The idea, at any rate, did not seem to have struck her alone, for at that moment she heard the Baron laughing softly to himself. She turned fiercely upon him.

‘Why did you come here? Oh, you don’t know what you have done!’

‘No great harm, I hope; I should be desolated if I had given rise to a so-called “scene.” A few words with your—cousin will put it right, no doubt. I wonder you don’t go after him to explain matters,’ he added, with a polite sneer.

‘I am going,’ said Ulrica, as with head held high she stepped out into the passage. An irresistible impulse was pushing her to follow her cousin, to speak to him, to say she knew not what, to throw over some barrier which she could not have defined but which she yet believed had sprung up between them within the last minute.

Sir Gilbert was standing at the other end of the passage, staring out through the dark window. Ulrica went up to where he stood, hurriedly, breathlessly, not knowing what she should say to him, feeling only that she must justify herself in his eyes, at any price, by any means.

‘Cousin Gilbert,’ she faltered, ‘let me explain.’

As she spoke he turned.

‘You do not need to explain,’ he said, commanding his voice with difficulty, ‘I heard enough.’

Ulrica could see his face better now: the excitement was still there, but it was a joyful excitement; the surprise and the horror which she had thought to read in his features were vanished.

‘You heard—what?’

‘I heard you giving that fellow his deserts,’ and Sir Gilbert laughed. ‘I was almost sorry for the poor wretch. Had the man insulted you?’

‘No,’ said Ulrica, lying boldly. ‘He only bored me.’

She foresaw that an admission of the truth must inevitably result in a collision between the two men, and she knew that, according to the custom of the country, such a

collision could only be remedied by the choice of pistols or swords. The shock of dismay with which the prospect filled her made many things clear to Ulrica.

‘I must thank you,’ said Sir Gilbert, taking her hand, ‘you have lifted a weight from my mind. Forgive me for having doubted you for one instant.’ And in that moment their eyes met, in the next he had dropped her hand and turned abruptly away. The movement passed unnoticed by Ulrica, or rather it seemed to explain itself naturally, for in that moment the door beside them opened and the company came streaming out, hooded and cloaked and in the best of spirits. The dance had been a great success, and the carriages were now standing at the door.

‘Midnight and more,’ said the forester’s wife, as she led off Ulrica to take what rest she could find on a couch which was at least as hastily got up as the dance had been. The good woman had taken great pains to drag together pillows and had displayed considerable ingenuity in the adaptation of covers, but she might as well have saved herself the trouble, for it was not until the square of the window began to whiten in the growing daylight that Ulrica at length fell asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

CYCLAMEN.

‘HOLY Saint Barbara!’ ejaculated the landlady of the ‘Golden Sun,’ as she stood at the inn-door, following with her eyes a couple who were walking up the village street, ‘the good days of the house are numbered, and no mistake. Either he has just come to the point or he is just coming to it, and by her face it isn’t hard to say how it will end. I have never seen her look like that before. I declare, I should scarcely have known her.’

So the landlady might well say, and small wonder, seeing that Ulrica had some difficulty in recognising herself

to-day. The light in her eyes, the glow on her cheek, which the mirror had shown her this morning, seemed to belong not to her, but to some new Ulrica, a happier, more light-hearted Ulrica, who had been born since yesterday. So completely had buoyancy of spirit mastered bodily exhaustion that as she passed up the village street with her cousin by her side, her step was as elastic, her bearing as light, as though the fatigues of yesterday had never been.

She had not been alone with her cousin since the moment that she had stood beside him in the passage of the forester's house last night. She had longed for and yet dreaded such a moment as this. During the drive of the morning which had brought them back to Glockenau she had regarded the presence of the young zither-player of last night, who acted as driver, alternately as a protection and an encumbrance; and when the first thing which met her at the Marienhof was an urgent summons from the miller's wife, whom she counted among the most pertinacious of her *protégés*, it was with a thrill of mixed emotions that she saw Sir Gilbert preparing to accompany her. That he should do so had indeed come to be a matter of course, but something told her that this walk would not be as other walks, that before she again put her foot on the threshold of the Marienhof some great and wonderful change would have come over her life.

Everything had become clear to her. The light in the passage of the forester's house had not burned very brightly, yet brightly enough to let her read the truth in her cousin's eyes and to illuminate her own heart to its very depth. That one brief look which had passed between them had been as the answer to all the riddles of these last so delicious yet so puzzling weeks.

Until this moment she had nourished hope with shadows, had been conscious only from time to time that the ground she walked on was uncertain, darkened even occasionally by the suggestion of something strange and unintelligible, which, at times, was shadowed forth in her cousin's mood and manner. During all these weeks he had never, directly or indirectly, in the ordinary acceptance of the word, made love to her. Looking back at these days of

constant intercourse she could not recall one moment or one incident which, closely analysed and reduced to its logical elements, could have given her the right to imagine that she was more to him than just his cousin Ulrica. It was instinct alone which had discovered something beyond the logical elements, and now she recognised that instinct had told her right. All doubts had vanished. The veil of ignorance with which the landlady's clumsy fingers had been the first to meddle was now brushed aside forever, and see, there was nothing terrible that lay behind, nothing which need poison her peace—it was, on the contrary, something beautiful and wonderful, which bid fair to turn the earth into paradise. All the hopes and wishes which until now had not dared to do more than stir softly and to whisper beneath their breath, leapt up vigorous and full-grown, throwing off their fetters and raising their voices as with one accord to a hymn of triumph.

That love played a not inconsiderable part in the world Ulrica had indeed known; the stripling with the curly hair and the bundle of arrows had come her way more than once, but for this cherub who met her with a leer or reeled tipsily across her path she had no understanding. That a better and brighter love existed she did not doubt, but if she thought of it at all she thought of it as of something which was meant only for people who were less oppressed by the cares of life, less hampered by practical considerations than she was. All the more overwhelming was the reality which had overpowered her now. Such complete possession had it taken of her that not only the light in her eyes and the colour on her cheeks spoke of the transformation she had undergone, but even her whole manner and bearing was penetrated by its influence. All the way to the mill she laughed and talked as she had never laughed and talked before; occasionally, and quite against her habit, she would burst into snatches of song; ever and again her step seemed to break into a dance. It seemed almost as though the great joy had made her light-headed. Now that the longed-for yet dreaded moment had come, an almost childish exultation had gained the upper hand, and that troubled thrill of expectation lay still beneath its

power. So busy was she with her own new self that she never noticed Sir Gilbert's taciturn mood, nor marked the uneasy, questioning glances which, from time to time, he turned upon her. Her gaiety awoke no response in him, rather it seemed to disquiet him. From minute to minute his replies were growing more laconic and his glance more moody.

'You seem in a wonderfully good humour to-day,' he remarked once, in a tone that sounded almost like irritation.

'Yes, I am in a very good humour,' answered Ulrica simply.

When the errand at the mill had been accomplished, and Ulrica, instead of turning homewards, passed on up the forest-path, it was with a curious hesitating reluctance that Sir Gilbert followed her. But still Ulrica saw nothing; her eyes, dazzled by the glory of her great discovery, were blind to the mere details of the moment. Instinctively she turned her steps towards her favourite spot, the ruins of the old mill. She had sat here with her cousin more than once since the day after his arrival, but never had the spirit of this delicious nook so entered into her own spirit as it did to-day. She tasted the idyllic solitude as she had never before tasted it; she read aright the meaning of those two moss-grown seats which chance had flung there side by side; the loud voice and the soft voice of the trickling water spoke to her as they never before had spoken. It was only since yesterday that she had learnt their language.

'Surely the moss has grown thicker and the grass greener since we were here last,' said Ulrica, with the laugh of a happy child. 'How pretty that thrush looks drinking out of the pool. Oh, and cyclamens!'

Within the last few days many slender buds had opened in the grass, and now the forest floor was strewn with countless reddish lilac blossoms.

'I must have some,' cried Ulrica, and she stooped to gather flower after flower; in less than two minutes her hands were full. 'I wonder whether I could make a wreath of them,' she said, as with the flowers heaped in her apron she sat down upon the old millstone beside the

stream. To gather flowers merely for the pleasure of doing so was a thing which as a rule did not enter her head. As a child her small fingers had never fastened a daisy-chain or fashioned a cowslip ball, they had always been employed in graver tasks. And yet these things were made for her as well as for others—she had discovered that to-day. Truly these were long, long arrears of anxiety and care, of gravity beyond her age, that Ulrica had to bring up on this day of days.

Sir Gilbert was standing two paces off, his brows drawn into a heavy frown, his eyes fixed intently upon Ulrica as she sat by the mill stream arranging the treasures in her lap.

‘Are you going to stand all the time I am making my wreath?’ she asked, glancing up at him. ‘I warn you that it will take some time; these grass-stalks are rather a slippery substitute for thread.’

Sir Gilbert made no reply, but stood for a minute longer, then, as though rousing himself by an effort, he made a step forward and sat down on the second mill-stone.

This was exactly as it should be, Ulrica felt more than thought, as she busied herself with her flowers. She was too happy to be impatient. It had been on the mere impulse of the moment, with no wish to hurry on the crisis, that she had led the way to this shadowy retreat. To her everything appeared clear and straight; the end which she had foreseen last night must be attained to-day—of that she never doubted. At what exact moment it would be attained was of less consequence; she was quite ready to wait, since she never for a moment dreamt that her happiness could escape her. He loved her—she knew that now—consequently he would tell her so; could anything be simpler? Not to Ulrica, at any rate, who, despite the harsh experiences of her life, was as a very child in such matters as this. No, it was not impatience she felt, only a moderate curiosity as to the exact shape which the great moment would take. Would he clothe what he had to say in words? And in what words? Or would he content himself with taking her hand between his own and allow his

eyes to speak for him? Ulrica had never read a novel in her life, nor had she ever possessed a girl *confidante*; she therefore had no foundation on which to build up the probabilities of the case.

It had rained itself out in the night, and this afternoon was clear and still, with a pale blue autumn sky and a delicate crispness in the air. Through the red and yellow leaves of the bushes which girdled the spot the sunshine glowed with softened power, as though it were shining through windows of stained glass. Summer was indeed departing, but departing with reluctant steps and many a long and lingering backward glance.

'I am glad it is a fine day,' said Ulrica; 'I should not have liked it to be dull or rainy just to-day.'

'Why not just to-day?' asked Sir Gilbert quickly.

'Oh, it is only an idea of mine,' and she bent over her flowers in order to hide the smile which would not be suppressed. Presently she raised her head again.

'I wonder,' she began, 'whether I am too old to learn to dance? Do you think I am?'

'You are very young, are you not?' was Sir Gilbert's somewhat vague reply.

'Yes. I am just twenty; I suppose that is not old, but somehow I had forgotten that I was young. I daresay I could learn it still. I suppose it is a rather foolish amusement, but there must be something in it since people are so wild about dancing; those girls last night seemed to be having such fun. After all, now that I come to think of it, it was rather amusing to sit and watch them. And those poor little dogs, the way they *could* not keep their tails out of the way of the dancers; it didn't seem to me so funny then, but really it was very absurd!' and Ulrica broke into a clear and ringing laugh.

Sir Gilbert started and frowned. Her laugh seemed to have touched him disagreeably.

'It didn't look so very difficult, either,' continued Ulrica, as she added flower after flower to the wreath which was rapidly growing beneath her fingers; 'and if the floor was good and one had the proper shoes on, I suppose it would be easier still. Are you fond of dancing, Cousin Gilbert?'

There was no immediate answer, and she repeated her question. Sir Gilbert appeared to be absorbed in knocking off pieces of moss from the stone beside him.

‘Who? I?’ he said, rousing himself at her second question, and speaking in a strange, bewildered manner. ‘Of dancing? Oh no; why should I care about dancing?’

‘But they dance in London, don’t they? And you generally go to London in the season.’

‘Did I? Yes, I daresay I did; but one gets tired of these things in time.’

‘You have given up balls?’

‘More or less.’

‘When were you at your last ball?’

‘I really cannot remember.’

‘A real big ball must be a very beautiful thing,’ said Ulrica, almost wistfully, ‘with all the lights, and the dresses, and the shining floors; I suppose people who give balls have got rooms like those in the Villa Flora. I wonder whether I shall ever go to a ball! There, I must see whether this wreath is big enough,’ and she unknotted her handkerchief and proceeded to fasten the flowers in her hair. Was it not natural and proper that she should crown herself thus, seeing that this was her hour of triumph?

‘Could I go to a ball with this wreath on, I wonder?’ She laughed again and again. He winced as though her laugh had been a sharp knife which touched him. ‘I think that if ever I go to a ball I must wear cyclamen in my hair.’

Sir Gilbert raised his eyes slowly from the moss he was ill-treating, and looked at her for one instant. She had never appeared half so lovely as she did now, with the delicate flush on her cheek and the softened light in her eyes. The diadem of pale lilac flowers which pressed her brow gave to her beauty something new and queenlike. He looked for one instant, then set his teeth and turned away.

Ulrica’s ear had not caught the groan which had escaped him, but she had seen the agitation on his face, and her attention was aroused at last. He had been inattentive, preoccupied, she told herself now, as she threw a mental

glance backwards over the last half-hour. Something was weighing on his mind, that was clear. Could it be that he had failed to guess her secret as she had guessed his, that he had not read in her eyes that which she had read in his, and that he doubted his success? Once more an irrepresible smile rose to her lips. Or perhaps he was only considering in what words he should speak to her. She glanced sideways at him. He was sitting with his face averted; yet something in his attitude, in the grasp of his hand upon his stick, which lay on his knee, in the quicker breath marked by the movement of his shoulders, betrayed the agitation against which he struggled. All at once Ulrica realised that the great moment was approaching; and now, at last, awed by the magnitude of that which was coming, her feverish gaiety died suddenly out. Her hands sank into her lap, and she sat tongue-tied upon her stone. In the same instant she discovered that she was trembling. What would the next moment bring? It was impossible that Sir Gilbert should speak again to make any casual or commonplace remark; since she had seen his face just now she felt assured of that. The pause began to be oppressive, yet Ulrica knew that it could be broken by no word of hers. Her tumultuously beating heart seemed as though it would choke her. Among the dead leaves at the foot of the bushes the thrushes and blackbirds were hopping so noisily that twice she turned her head uneasily, almost expecting to see a human intruder. In point of fact, it was at the end of about a minute and a half, though Ulrica had known few hours and a half which had seemed to her so long, that Sir Gilbert turned towards her with a sort of jerk.

‘By the way,’ he said, speaking with an awkwardness which contrasted strangely with his usual ease of manner, ‘you asked me just now, didn’t you, when I last was at a ball?’ He did not look at her as he spoke, but at the old mill-wheel which stood in the bed of the stream about half a dozen yards from where they sat.

‘Yes,’ said Ulrica, in blank astonishment, utterly taken aback by the irrelevancy of the remark.

‘I told you I couldn’t remember. I have remembered

now. The last ball I went to was a court ball three years ago.' He paused for just one perceptible second before he added: 'I went there with Lady Nevyll.'

'Lady Nevyll?' replied Ulrica, looking up in surprise. 'I did not know your mother was still alive.'

'My mother is not alive.'

'Then who is Lady Nevyll?'

Sir Gilbert's glance remained nailed to the mill-wheel as intensely as though he were bent on counting its spokes, or determining the exact number of half-dead ferns which hung from its rotting wood.

'Lady Nevyll,' he answered with deliberate slowness, 'is my wife.'

Ulrica heard the word quite distinctly; indeed, it had been pronounced with such laborious clearness that it was not possible to mistake it for any other word; yet she was conscious of no immediate shock. The idea embodied in that sentence which had just been spoken lay too many worlds asunder from the hope which filled her heart to be grasped by her all at once.

'I don't understand,' she answered, after a moment's pause; 'you never told me that you had been married. Are you a widower, Cousin Gilbert?'

'No, I am not a widower.'

'But if you are not a widower your wife must be alive?'

'Of course my wife is alive.'

'But if your wife is alive,' said Ulrica, still with that dazed air, and speaking as though she were arguing out the case to herself, 'you are then a married man?'

'Certainly I am a married man.'

Sir Gilbert spoke impatiently, still looking at the mill-wheel and not at her.

'You should have told me that before,' said Ulrica, very quickly, and speaking just above her breath. Scarcely had she said it than she pressed her lips together, feeling as though she must die of shame. It was his look which had borne in the truth upon her more than the mere words in themselves. A black cloud seemed to have sunk out of the blue sky straight before her eyes, and through its dense gloom she could see the pine trees tottering around her.

The water, which but a minute ago had sung so softly and so sweetly, now hissed hideously in her ear. Later on, whenever she looked back at this moment, she could remember telling herself that she must not faint, for that if she fainted everything would be betrayed.

‘Don’t ask me any questions; it is a sad story.’

She heard these words spoken hurriedly in her cousin’s voice, without the power of making any reply. In the midst of the confusion of her spirit she retained just enough presence of mind to realise that it would be unsafe to trust her voice. For greater than the astonishment, and more intense than the shock of pain, was the desire to shield her dignity, if it were not indeed too late. Away was flown all that rare gaiety which had made her heart so light and her laugh so clear; one minute had sufficed to sober her. She put down her hand and with trembling fingers felt for the stone beside her, steadying herself upon it as she sat. The contact with something solid was an actual help in this bewildering moment, when everything seemed melting from her. What had she said? she asked herself. Could she still hope to cover up that wound which had been struck so freshly that it had scarcely yet had time to bleed? That was the first necessity; as for other considerations, they could wait. Never mind details, never mind explanations, never mind *how* it was that this extraordinary thing could have come to pass; it *had* come to pass, that was enough; there would be time enough for all that later; her dignity, her womanly pride, these must be thought of first.

A commonplace remark, oh, for a commonplace remark! Now would have been the moment. Had Ulrica been a student of Shakespeare, it is not unlikely that she would have inwardly groaned, ‘A kingdom for a commonplace remark!’

The black cloud was by this time tolerably dispersed, and the pine trees were again standing straight, but still nothing which it would sound rational to say occurred to her mind, and Sir Gilbert’s imagination seemed to have run as dry as her own. Should it be something about those birds still hopping among the rustling leaves? Could she not make some remark about the effect of the sunlight on

the pine-stems? Yes, surely, that was it. She cleared her throat to speak, her lips moved, but her voice would not obey her will. It was no use. She sat still for one minute longer, as though gathering together her strength, then resolutely rose to her feet.

'It is late,' she said, speaking at last, in a flat and toneless voice, 'I am going home.'

As she stood up the flowers which filled her apron dropped to the ground. She stared at them as they fell, then mechanically put up her hand, and pulling the cyclamen wreath from her head, flung it into the bed of the little stream. Then, followed more slowly by Sir Gilbert, she hurried from the spot.

CHAPTER XVI.

'AS USUAL.'

ULRICA could never afterwards distinctly remember how the walk home was got through; she knew only that after she had once heard the sound of her own voice the spell seemed broken and she was again able to speak, even to talk. It was difficult to talk, but not so difficult as it would have been to remain silent; and thus, with the help of a good many superfluous and painfully self-evident remarks, supported by a few lucky chances in the way of meetings with some of Ulrica's peasant *protégés* who most opportunely happened to be in need of advice, the next half-hour was weathered. When they parted at the gate of the Marienhof it was with the feeling that they would meet again on a different footing next morning.

Scarcely was the parting over than a great terror came upon Ulrica at the thought of this next meeting. When the gate had shut behind Sir Gilbert, she walked rapidly to the house, and sitting down upon the nearest chair, for indeed she would not have been able to stand much longer, proceeded to think out the matter. What exactly had hap-

pened? Her cousin Gilbert was a married man, there could be no doubt of that. He had told her so distinctly; he was a married man, and it was a sad story—something of this sort she had heard him murmur. Was this why his wife's existence had never been mentioned till to-day? A married man; and, after all, why not? Why, she asked herself, had she so unhesitatingly taken for granted that Sir Gilbert was a bachelor? Looking back now, right back to the very beginning of her acquaintance, or rather to her correspondence with him, she could not imagine what it was that had originated the impression, and how the impression had grown to be a belief. Certainly he had never told her that he was married, but neither had he ever told her that he was not. Ought not his very reserve and the very reluctance he had always exhibited to touch upon matters that related to himself have aroused her suspicions? She told herself now that they ought. It was all a mistake from beginning to end. Ulrica, having reached this point in her reflections, rose from her chair and slowly crossed the room towards the door which she had forgotten to close. But before she had reached it she stood still and put her hand to her forehead, staring straight in front of her. She had remembered something. A mistake? No, she had not been mistaken in the reading of that one glance last night. What, then, was she to think? She walked to the door and shut it impatiently, then began to busy herself about the room. It was better not to think at all; it was only by keeping her senses collected that she could hope successfully to get through the farce which would have to be enacted to-morrow. For she was determined that the farce should be played out—the farce of his being just her cousin Gilbert, and nothing more. She would return to the manner and the mood of the early days of their intercourse, of the time when she had declared that having a cousin was almost as good as having a brother. It was true that she had guessed his secret, but it was not certain that he had guessed hers. Ulrica, at least, would not, even to herself, admit that it was certain. She would fight for her secret as long as her strength lasted.

Sir Gilbert appeared later than usual at the Marienhof

next morning, but still he appeared as usual, and looked almost as usual, except that by the shadows around his eyes it was easy to see that he had not slept. So carefully had Ulrica schooled herself that her voice scarcely trembled as she said: 'Good-morning, Cousin Gilbert.' She added some remark at random as to the prospects of the weather for the day, and then she placed a chair for him, exactly as she had always done, and went on with the dusting of her shelves exactly as usual. It was all exactly as it had always been; she was able to speak and to move, even to laugh; the only thing she was not able to do was to look at him. Though her 'Good-morning, Cousin Gilbert,' had been very boldly spoken, yet she had taken care to look past him at the clock on the wall as she spoke it; and Sir Gilbert, on his side, even while he responded, looked at the window opposite, then at the stove, anywhere but at her face. As to her outward appearance Ulrica felt tolerably easy. She did not think that would betray her. She had indeed been startled by the ghastliness of her face this morning; but cold water and a rough towel had remedied that to a certain extent, and she took the precaution of keeping the light at her back as much as possible.

'Where is Schiller?' said Ulrica presently, speaking with a sprightliness of tone which the occasion somehow did not seem to demand. 'Are we to have no reading this morning, Cousin Gilbert?'

There was to be no exception made; since he usually read to her during the time that she was occupied with dusting the *Stube*, she was resolved that he should read to her to-day. Neither directly nor indirectly was it to be admitted that anything had happened since yesterday which could make a difference between them; and, besides, there was something very badly wanted to fill a gap just at that moment, and Schiller would do as well as anything else. Sir Gilbert had begun by being exceedingly talkative; his greeting had been so lively as to be almost boisterous; and before he had been two minutes in the room Ulrica had recognised, with an immense feeling of relief, that the labour of playing out the farce was not to be left to her alone. Sir Gilbert had evidently come to

much the same resolution that she had come to last night, only, being a man, he naturally played his part much worse. It is said that in every woman there lies the seed of an actress; and though Ulrica had never suspected herself of the faintest powers of dissimulation, there is no doubt that her woman's wit helped to make tolerable the situation, which, left to Sir Gilbert's mercy, could not have held out beyond the first ten minutes. He altogether overdid the thing; his liveliness was immediately recognised as mere nervous excitement; his eagerness to talk, to talk incessantly, and about anything that came to hand, was too palpable, and the inevitable result was that the topics thus belaboured showed an intolerable tendency to grow threadbare. Occasionally he would appear not to be quite certain what he was talking about; more than once his sentence remained unfinished, and having sat for some moments plunged in thought, he would rouse himself with a sort of jerk and start another upon some totally different subject. Also he exposed himself to things that were too much for his self-control. Thus, for instance, while Ulrica was still busying herself desperately with her shelves, he exclaimed, with a great show of interest, 'A spider-web! I declare, there's a spider-web; you must leave that spider-web to me, Cousin Ulrica. Where's the broom?'

The broom was fetched, and Sir Gilbert proceeded to operate on the rafters. It was not by any means the first time that he had done so; the spider-webs in the angles of the ceiling had often before been left to him, seeing that they were out of Ulrica's reach. It had become a sort of standing joke for him to spy them out, and he had even acquired a certain dexterity in the matter of their annihilation. But to-day either his dexterity had abandoned him or he had become short-sighted; he brushed away a great many more spider-webs than there were on the ceiling, while the one actual specimen present escaped unmolested. Ulrica, whose attention happened to be caught by the circumstance, seized upon it and attempted to make capital of it as she would have attempted to make capital of anything which promised to fill up a few more minutes with harmless talk. She even had the

courage to rally him on the inferior quality of his housemaid's work.

'I should infallibly have given you a fortnight's warning for that,' she added, with a laugh. 'Give me the broom.'

It was not badly done, and sounded almost natural, except that she made the mistake of laughing too loud. And then, as she took the broom from him, their hands touched, and for one moment the farce was in danger of breaking down. Ulrica drew back as though her fingers had touched a hot iron; it was not easy to say which of them had let go the broom first, but in the next instant it had fallen with a clatter to the ground between them.

She took a long time to pick it up, while the usually so courteous Sir Gilbert, instead of saving her that trouble, walked straight to the window and began drumming on the panes. It was at this juncture, and as she again raised her flushed face, that Schiller occurred to Ulrica's mind. A few more minutes were tided over with the search for the volume, which was not immediately forthcoming, and then Sir Gilbert installed himself with it on the *Ofenbank*, exactly as usual, while Ulrica remained beside her shelves, which, to judge from the time they took, must to-day have been in want of an extraordinary amount of dusting. The shelves gave her an excuse to keep her back towards her cousin, and she clung to them, therefore, as though her very life depended on the conscientious polishing of each plate, and the immaculate spotlessness of each coffee-cup. After a time she caught herself not listening. This must not be.

'Let me see, what is he reading about?' she said to herself. 'Wallenstein? Surely we finished that several days ago.'

But, after all, that was a mere matter of detail. She must make some sort of remark, just in order to show that she was all attention. What scene were they at? Countess Terzky was speaking, she was pleading that the secret of the conspiracy should be kept from the Duchess, who would not have the strength to bear the announcement.

'No, that she certainly would not,' remarked Ulrica. 'I suppose that Duchess was a well-meaning creature, but

even in real life I have seldom come across anybody quite as colourless as that.'

'Which Duchess are you speaking about?' asked Sir Gilbert, looking up from the book.

'Why, of Wallenstein's wife, of course.'

'Wallenstein? Oh yes, to be sure; but wasn't it "Mary Stuart" we began the other day?'

'How odd it is,' went on Ulrica, rather hurriedly, 'that remarkable men so often have insignificant wives. Wallenstein would perhaps have been quite different from what he was if he had had a wife who understood him.'

'Do you think so?' said Sir Gilbert, in so strange a tone that Ulrica quickly realised on what dangerous ground she had trodden.

'But—but it is a very fine scene,' she hastened to add, 'and Wallenstein himself is a most interesting character.'

'Most interesting,' assented Sir Gilbert readily.

'And the language is so fine, even in the translation.'

'The language is very fine.'

'Though I suppose it must be much finer still in the original.'

'I suppose so; yes, certainly it must be very much finer in the original.'

With this all possible platitudes about either Schiller or Wallenstein seemed to be exhausted, and something else had to be quickly resorted to.

Oh, the horror of that long, weary forenoon! Out of doors it would have been easier to get through the time, but long before Ulrica had done dusting her shelves the morning mist had dissolved itself into rain, and a walk could not be thought of. This room, in which she had spent so many happy hours, now appeared to her like a prison-house; she could scarcely breathe its air. From minute to minute the strain was growing more intense, from minute to minute it was becoming more difficult to avoid those terrible pauses of silence which more and more seemed to be charged with electricity. Try as she would, Ulrica could not again hit off that tone of cousinly friendliness which had made the early days of their intercourse so pleasant; it eluded her at every turn.

It was a relief beyond words when one o'clock struck and Sir Gilbert rose—this also was just as usual—to go for his dinner to the inn. She would have an hour or two of respite, Ulrica told herself, it would be at any rate a pause between the acts; but scarcely had an hour passed when she heard the well-known step outside and the well-known knock at the door.

Was he back already? Was the second act of the farce to follow so quickly upon the first?

She rose with a feeling of despair, and opened the door. Sir Gilbert was standing on the doorstep.

'You are surprised to see me back so soon,' he began at once, speaking with nervous haste, 'but I have got a letter which makes it necessary for me to start, so I thought I had better come to say good-bye at once; I have not begun my packing yet, so I am afraid I can't stop.'

'You are going away?' said Ulrica, in dismay, forgetting her part for one moment. Somehow she had not foreseen this very natural contingency.

'Yes, it is urgent business; I mustn't lose a day.'

'Oh no, of course if it is urgent business you mustn't lose a day.'

She had already recovered herself sufficiently to be able to say this almost as though she meant it. She knew perfectly well that Sir Gilbert could by no possible means have got a letter within the last hour, seeing that the one mail in the day came by the *Stellwagen* in the evening; and Sir Gilbert himself, had he reflected for a moment, must have been conscious of the absolute untenability of his assertion, but even had he so reflected it is probable that he would still have made the assertion. At junctures like this even a transparent screen is better than no screen at all.

'You wish me a lucky journey, and all that sort of thing, do you not?' said Sir Gilbert, putting out his hand with a very odd laugh. 'I shall look in for a final good-bye if I can, but I have lots to do at the inn, packing and settling and so on, so I can't be absolutely certain.'

And then for one instant their hands met—it could not

be otherwise—their eyes just managed to escape meeting, and Sir Gilbert was rapidly walking down the path and Ulrica stood alone in the doorway.

He would not come back, of that she felt certain, though she was aware that there wanted four hours to the starting of the *Stellwagen*, and though she knew that the 'settling' would be at most an affair of ten minutes, while the 'packing' consisted in stuffing some shirts and some hairbrushes into a roomy portmanteau. And of course he did not come back.

She did not leave the house that afternoon, and when it drew near six o'clock she stood a few paces back from the window, where she could not be seen, waiting to hear the rumble of the departing *Stellwagen*. She debated within herself as to whether she ought not to show herself, whether it would not appear more natural, more 'as usual,' if she stood at the window and waved him a farewell? She had even taken a handkerchief in her hand and made a step forward, but then her courage failed her.

She stood still just behind the curtain and listened while the rumble swelled, while it came close and died away. Then she turned back into the room.

'So that is over,' she said aloud. Yet in her heart a voice cried out that it had only begun.

CHAPTER XVII.

OPHELIA.

It was not till long after dark that the *Stellwagen* reached the terminus of its journey. Next morning it would start back again the way it had come, for here the limits of that very respectable vehicle's kingdom were reached. From this point onward the steam-whistle took up the song of the postilion's horn.

Sir Gilbert had had the interior of the *Stellwagen* to himself, he had the platform of the little lonely country

station almost to himself as well. Though the local line had been opened some years ago, the neighbourhood had not yet got used to night travelling.

'Where to?' asked a sleepy voice at his elbow. The traveller became aware that he had been standing in a brown study straight in front of the ticket-office.

'Where to? I've asked you twice.' Sir Gilbert looked hard at the man.

'Where to?' He was putting the same question to himself in his mind.

'Can I have a ticket straight to Calais?' he inquired after a minute.

So unprecedented was the request that the drowsy clerk first gave one long incredulous stare, then, with a groan, sleepily pulled towards him a heavy volume in which he began to turn over page after page, going through various arithmetical calculations between whiles upon stray sheets of blotting-paper. It was evident that the calculations were not going to lead to any very immediate result, and Sir Gilbert, moving away from the window, began to study the railway-maps on the wall. Besides these maps the walls were ornamented with various illustrated and highly glazed advertisements of fashionable or would-be fashionable, newly discovered or long-established health-resorts, Austrian, German, and French. Presently something about one of the glazed pictures seemed to have arrested Sir Gilbert's attention. He stood for a minute immovable, frowning intently at the representation of an elaborate *Curhaus* flanked with broad terraces and mirrored in a preternaturally glassy lake. Had the flourish regarding the 'ideal situation' and the 'peculiarly health-giving' quality of the air at Valerie Baden snared another victim, or was it the promise of the 'elegantly appointed *Table a'hote*' and the 'musical promenade' every evening which had captivated Sir Gilbert's fancy?

He turned abruptly from the wall and walked straight back to the window.

'Never mind about those figures,' he broke in upon the *sotto voce* calculation, 'I've changed my mind. Give me a ticket for Valerie Bad.'

Half an hour later the express was rushing fiery-eyed over the plain. The train was pretty full, for this was the moment when roaming summer-birds are on the wing towards the winter warmth of their nests. The smoking compartments were crowded, suffocating, and noisy. Nevertheless in the noisiest and fullest there sat one man who was neither smoking nor talking, but who leant back in his corner, his arms folded, his travelling-cap drawn deep over his eyes. His five fellow-travellers, who had reached the stage of exchanging cigars, never doubted that he was asleep. But though his head was bent and his eyes closed, Gilbert Nevyl was as wide awake as any of these noisy youngsters; intensely wide awake and feverishly busy. He also, like Ulrica, was seeking to regain the ground under his feet; he also, as Ulrica had done, was attempting to reconstruct his own individuality after the shock from which he had barely escaped. He had lost himself and must find himself again. And it was by the light of the past that he hoped to find himself—of the past as it had been before this bewildering present began.

Every moment of crisis has the faculty of rousing memory to an intense degree. Gilbert Nevyl had reached a crisis, or, more strictly speaking, he was going forward to meet one, was rushing towards it over the plain, at the rate of thirty miles an hour; what wonder, therefore, that far-off recollections should start up to confront him, that the sparks which flew past the window should appear like ghostly torches throwing their searching light into the secret recesses of his mind, and that each throb of the engine, instead of carrying him forwards over the plain, seemed to be bearing him backwards into the long buried past? Back, back, back,—he could hear the very word as it quivered in the air,—back over these autumn months, back to the time when the spell of the fir-clad valley had not yet fallen upon him; back, yet further back, to the long and empty years which had gone before,—back to the moment when the great mistake of his life had been made.

How had the mistake come to be made? Given his individuality and given his circumstances, it had been

all but unavoidable. In the first place, he was rich, in the second place he was not happy—two terribly dangerous positions for a marriageable man to be in. It is only stretching a point very little to say that he was not happy precisely because he was rich. Great wealth is a burden which only a very thick-skinned or a very apathetic nature can bear without flinching. Brought up as he had been in the traditions of a house more remarkable for its ambitious pursuit of power than for any ideal yearnings for the bettering of mankind, surrounded, moreover, by flatterers from his earliest childhood, it was indeed hard to say how that spark of philanthropy had come to live within him. It could only be one of those freaks in which nature occasionally indulges. Gilbert himself was far too well aware of its incongruity not to keep its existence anxiously concealed, even from himself, so far as that was possible. In the world in which he lived there was no room for such ideas, and there would be no response to them—of that he felt instinctively certain.

‘Are you ever worried by the question as to how many dozen people die of starvation in London every day?’ he once asked a young marquis of his acquaintance, upon some sudden impulse.

They were lunching at their club together, and the young marquis was in the act of carrying a morsel of very exquisitely prepared *poulet à la Marengo* to his lips. At Gilbert’s question he stopped, opened-mouthed, the morsel poised in midair.

‘Never,’ he said, in the most convincing of tones, when he had recovered himself sufficiently. ‘Do *you* ever feel that way?’

‘Not often; only when my digestion is out of order.’

‘My dear fellow,’ said the other anxiously, for he was a good-natured young man and fond of Gilbert, ‘you mustn’t neglect your digestion. Hadn’t you better see Blacker?’

‘Perhaps I had better,’ agreed Gilbert, without moving a muscle of his face.

‘And in the meantime do what you can to keep up your spirits. I was just on the point of asking you whether you’d let me drive you down to Hurlingham, when you

took away my breath with that uncomfortable question. They've got a splendid new lot of pigeons, and Captain Atherton is to make his first show on the polo-ground since the smash of his thigh-bone. You'll come, won't you?'

'Oh yes, I'll come,' said Gilbert, tossing off his claret.

And accordingly he went, and saw innumerable pigeons butchered, and saw two ponies lamed on the polo-ground, and was smiled at by countless young ladies in lovely summer dresses; and once more the fact was forced upon him that he was a fortunate among the fortunates, and a fool not to enjoy life as it came. Once or twice he attempted to rise to the height on which Nature had destined him to stand, but the enervating atmosphere in which he lived was too much for him; his foot slipped on the first obstacle it encountered, the million clinging threads which grew as rank as weeds from out of the great society swamp clasped themselves about him and drew him downwards, choking vapours rose up to stifle his breath and bewilder his eyes, and after a brief struggle he would sink back again into inaction. It was not that energy was wanting in his nature, but that he belonged to that order of men whose susceptibility to feminine influence is of the extreme sort, and whose lives will be either a great failure or a great success according to whether they fall into the hands of the right or the wrong woman. Such men—and they are by no means the least manly men—without the right influence will always remain incomplete, their character undeveloped or one-sided, their whole individuality unfinished. And this comes not from a lack of strength, but rather from a certain ultra-masculine unwieldiness which requires the light and cunning touch of a woman's hand to set the machinery in motion.

So perfectly aware was Gilbert of this want in his nature that he was forever searching London drawing-rooms on the look-out for that 'right woman' who was to enable him to become quite a man. Once or twice he believed himself to be on the right track; it was quite astonishing to find how many young ladies were ready to enter with interest into the discussion of such themes as the bettering of lodging-houses in the East-end of London. But hither-

to the heir to eighty thousand a year had always discovered in time that it was a form of flirtation.

At last there came a moment when it seemed as though he had verily found her. He was still almost boyish in years, though not far from middle-aged in experience, when one hot June evening, his gaze, roaming listlessly around a crowded ball-room, fell upon a slight girlish figure swathed in floating draperies of watery blue. The pale, golden hair lay around the white forehead in a half-transparent haze, the slender neck was slightly drooped, and the delicate fingers played with the tangle of water-lilies which nestled at the side of her skirt. One white water-lily shone like a star in her hair, and—was it the water-lilies or was it the wistful gaze of her sad blue eyes?—but to Gilbert Nevyl she appeared the most ideal embodiment of an Ophelia that he had ever seen off the boards of any London or continental theatre. Perhaps 'poetical' was the adjective to apply to her rather than 'beautiful.' Her beauty, at any rate, was of too delicate a sort to appear to full advantage in gas-light. She appeared to droop in the glare, to shrink before the noise around her. Her eyes were her most remarkable feature, not for one moment to be confounded with the many other pairs of blue eyes in the room, dark or light, dreamy or mischievous, sparkling or sober. These eyes were supremely sad, and it was their sadness which was their charm. Once having met their gaze, Gilbert was haunted by them; he had never seen eyes so young look so heart-rendingly sad before, certainly not in a ball-room. She sat quite still in her neglected corner, by the side of an insignificant-looking chaperon. From the appearance of the chaperon, as well as from the isolation of the pair, Gilbert easily concluded that they were nobodies. Could it be the want of partners alone which had lent that pathetic depth to those blue eyes opposite? Gilbert's curiosity was aroused; he felt that he wished to clear up the point, and following that impulse which draws unwary man blindly towards his fate, he left his place and sought an introduction.

As he had surmised, Ophelia was nobody, merely a nameless little country Miss enjoying a brief outing in Lon-

don. She was penniless as well as nameless. Had he been more given to scanning details, Gilbert might have guessed this much for himself; for instance, he might have observed—that the water-lilies which shed such a poetical glamour over Miss Dickson's appearance had done duty more than once.

Ophelia, whose name, by-the-bye, was Charlotte, did not 'gush' as the other philanthropical young ladies had done, she did not work herself up into a 'state' upon any of the subjects upon which, in the progress of their acquaintance, Gilbert somewhat diffidently and tentatively touched; she only sat and listened almost silently, dropping a musical monosyllable now and then, and letting her wistful blue eyes do the rest for her. And they did their work so well, and with such remarkable rapidity, that before the first week of the London outing was over it had become the chief interest of Gilbert Nevvill's life to note the joyous lighting up of their azure depths which his approach invariably called forth. There lay an infinite charm in this momentary lifting of the cloud, and the mute homage which it seemed to imply appeared to him infinitely touching. He married her, never doubting that he had found not only a kindred spirit, but also that he was loved.

And then slowly, slowly came the discovery. He had married a beautiful image. There was absolutely nothing behind the blue eyes; they were a mere accident, of which her woman's wit had taught her to make the most. Their wonderful depth they owed purely to physical causes; that overpowering sadness which had taken his pity by storm was no sadness at all, but only a result of the expansive properties of the pupil and the mixture of the colouring-matter, partly also the curve of the eyelashes. It was not a question of soul and of feeling, only a question of angles and of lines.

For a time he loyally strove to believe that though she was not the woman he had taken her to be, she yet loved him as far as it lay in her nature to love; but this hope also had to be abandoned reluctantly yet definitively. The little country Miss had caught him according to all the rules of the game.

It was from the moment of this discovery that Gilbert became an embittered man. This had been the death-blow to all the healthy ambition within him. The marriage was childless—a further disappointment. The affection which had sprung to such sudden life within him withered as suddenly, starved to death on the rocky soil.

Within the first three years of their marriage the young couple had become completely estranged. Whether Gilbert was entirely blameless, who can say? Even beautiful images and even women who make ambitious marriages have sometimes got hearts, but these hearts require to be awakened. Be that as it may, Gilbert did not apply himself to the task, but in the reaction of his disappointment plunged back into the whirlpool of the life from which he had thought to escape.

They did not separate, there was no need for that; both Morton Hall and the London house were big enough to enable Sir Gilbert and Lady Nevyl to go their own ways and to live their own lives without troubling each other. For years past the only moments which they spent in each other's society had been in public; if she had a fancy for Paris, he generally found it more convenient to go to Boulogne; when he went down to Scotland for the 12th, she took the opportunity of paying visits in the south of England. They played no part in each other's lives—she bore his name, and he paid her bills, that was about all.

This then was the 'sad story,' as he himself had called it. Not tragical, perhaps, or belonging at any rate to a very every-day order of tragedy, but sad, indeed, beyond all hope. It was with this past at his back that he first looked into Ulrica Eldringen's face on the September evening on which he set foot within the Marienhof. He had never intentionally suppressed the fact of his wife's existence. It was with no purpose in his mind that he omitted all mention of her in his letters, it was simply that she stood outside his thoughts. She did not colour one inch of his existence. Not till the intercourse between him and his cousin had begun to deepen in interest did he realise that Ulrica believed him to be unmarried. By this

time the spell was strong upon him; he had reached that dreamy stage when clear thought becomes a burden. Indistinctly only had he been conscious of a reluctance to mention the name of his wife just now. That word once pronounced, some change would be worked which he dreaded.

He had awakened only in time to see the abyss at his feet. Another step and he would have been over the edge. The only hope was to turn and fly.

In the first instant of reaction it had seemed that it was no matter in which direction he fled, so long as he left the dangerous ground. The chance sight of one of the glazed pictures beside the ticket-office of the station, coupled with a sudden recollection, had given a distinct direction as well as a distinct object to this flight.

As the express rattled and roared over the plain, it was not of Glockenau that Gilbert Nevyll was thinking, but of Valerie Bad. He was looking forward, not backward. His thoughts were not bent upon a parting scene; rather they leapt onward to picture the scene of meeting, on which he knew that his last desperate hope was staked.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST CHANCE.

THE glazed picture at the railway station proved to have been a somewhat flattered portrait of Valerie Bad. The *Curhaus* was there, it is true, and so were the terraces and so was the lake, but the former were not nearly so broad nor the latter so glassy as their counterfeits on paper would have led one to suppose. This, at any rate, was Sir Gilbert's indistinct impression as he approached the terraced building; or was it only the heavy autumn mist and the yellowing trees in the *Curhaus* gardens which made such a dismal setting to the picture? Great drops of wet stood upon the fallen leaves which had been swept into

heaps upon the deserted walks; the greater number of the benches had been removed, some of the flower-beds were being covered up with fir-branches. Besides the gardeners at work, Sir Gilbert caught sight of only one solitary old gentleman taking a constitutional morning stroll along a distant gravel-walk. He scanned the building itself; the shutters of nearly half the windows were closed.

'She may be gone,' he said to himself, with a thrill which was as much hope as fear.

'Lady Nevyl?' repeated the porter, in answer to his query, and he turned slowly and meditatively to a ledger by his side. Not that he could not have answered the question without any such reference, but an appearance of doubt accorded better with the dignity of the establishment, and gave the impression that visitors of the order of Lady Nevyl formed the bulk of the Valerie Bad *habitués*.

Sir Gilbert stood by and gnawed his under lip while the man's fat forefinger travelled down the page. A devouring impatience had taken possession of him, he wanted to know his fate at once.

At the end of a minute the porter looked up. 'Forty-five to Fifty,' he remarked, closing the ledger with a bang.

'Thanks. Oh, I'll find my way, don't trouble.'

'If the monsieur will wait one minute—'

But Sir Gilbert had already turned and was half-way up the staircase.

'He must be her lover, surely,' reflected the fat porter, staring with round eyes after the impetuous stranger; 'and yet he's run it pretty close. Two days more and he would have missed her.'

Forty-five to Fifty were among the best apartments of the *Curhaus*. They were situated on the first floor close by the principal staircase, so that Sir Gilbert had not much of a voyage of discovery before him. At the door he paused for one instant and drew his hand slowly across his eyes. Then, rousing himself, he rapped loudly.

There was a moment's silence, followed by a somewhat astonished: 'Come in.'

Lady Nevyl, in a morning robe, was reclining on a sofa. Breakfast was served on a table by her side, but it

was not the breakfast with which at present her attention was occupied. A choice of papers and periodicals littered the sofa and the chairs beside her; some of them were flung down open on their faces, others had evidently not yet been touched by the paper-knife. Over one of the chairbacks there hung a stripe of coloured embroidery with the needle sticking in it; on the writing-desk at her elbow a half-written letter lay open on the blotting-pad. Altogether it appeared that, young though the day was, her ladyship had already been bending her mind in various directions. She was so placed that though her back was half turned towards the door, the person entering caught her full image in the mirror opposite. Sir Gilbert, having closed the door behind him, paused for an instant and looked hard into this mirror. He gazed eagerly, keenly, like a man who is determined to find there what he scarcely dares to hope for.

What he saw was but a faint, a very faint image of that poetical vision which had taken his fancy by storm on that hot June evening eighteen years ago. Charlotte Nevyll's beauty belonged to a type which has great difficulty gracefully to submit to middle-age. An Ophelia past her first youth is indeed as hard to imagine as a water-lily growing on dry land. This species of flower requires to be gathered with the dew still fresh upon it. No Ophelia should live long enough to let the cares of life brush the bloom from her cheek, or dig crow's-feet about her eyes. To come up to the standard of artistic perfection expected of her she ought to die young. If she prefers to survive, it is on her own responsibility and at the sacrifice of the ideal. What eighteen years ago had been bewitching slenderness now came dangerously near to deserving the adjective meagre; the once so exquisite pallor had become tinged with a shade of sallowness; the golden haze of hair no longer lay so softly, nor so thickly, nor yet with such a golden glow around the temples. With all this, Lady Nevyll could still lay claim to the title of an 'interesting woman'; perhaps she could have laid claim to more, had she been set out to fuller advantage, for this class of good looks is peculiarly dependent upon its accessories. Her

face was a wreck, no doubt, but still it was the wreck of what had once been beauty, and many women, with less material at their command would have contrived to be admired, even at thirty-eight. But whether it was a want of judgment or whether it was indifference or negligence, there could be no doubt that Lady Nevyll was not, in the vulgar phrase, 'made the most of.' Her morning-gown, though made of an expensive material, was carelessly put on, betraying in the set of the ruffles or the turn of the bows none of those little touches of coquetry which proclaim the woman who is anxious to appear her best. Her hair was unbecomingly dressed, her lace cap was of a shape which made her appear older than she was.

The feature about her which had altered the least were the eyes; they were as wonderfully blue now as they had been when they ensnared Gilbert Nevyll and caused him to stumble headlong into the pitfall of their seemingly bottomless depth, but the difference was that whereas then their gaze had been wistful it now betrayed nothing but a somewhat helpless discontent.

As Sir Gilbert entered, Lady Nevyll flung aside one magazine and took up another. 'I did not ring,' she remarked, in that low musical voice which, next to her eyes, had perhaps been her greatest charm, and without taking the trouble to turn her head.

The silence appeared to strike her; she looked up and saw her husband in the glass, as he stood motionless two steps from the sofa. The book half dropped from her hand.

'Gilbert, *you* here?' she exclaimed, in a tone which betrayed nothing but the most complete astonishment, as she turned to face him.

'Yes, I here; it is queer, isn't it?' said Gilbert, with a sudden nervous laugh. 'The most unlikely place in the world for me to be at, I admit.'

'But I thought you were—let me see, where did I think you were? Were you not shooting chamois somewhere?'

'So I was, but I have been to other places since, the most extraordinary places, and I have had the most extraordinary adventures. Would you like to hear about them?'

Lady Nevyll did not answer at once. She was staring at her husband in bewilderment. He spoke fast and excitedly; his tumbled hair and disarranged necktie gave a touch of recklessness to his appearance. It was evident that he had travelled far, and it was evident, too, that he had come to her room straight from the railway.

'I don't understand,' she remarked at last. 'Has anything particular happened?'

'Nothing that you would call very particular, I suppose.'

'Have you brought me any news?'

'News? Oh no; it is all as old as the hills.'

'Then what on earth have you come to do here?'

'I—I, well, I have come to see you,' said Sir Gilbert, with strange awkwardness. 'You see I was on the point of starting home when it occurred to me that probably you had not yet left Valerie Bad, and I thought I might as well make the run round and see whether you were packing up, and whether—'

'Well?' with a triple point of interrogation.

'Whether you were inclined to let me accompany you home. Why do you look so astonished, Charlotte? Surely there is nothing peculiar in the proposal?'

'It is by far the most peculiar thing that has happened since we were married.'

Lady Nevyll leant back again among her cushions. She had recovered her self-possession sufficiently to speak in her usual tone of chilly languor. There was something at the same time dispirited and dispiriting about the trailed-out accents.

Sir Gilbert appeared not to have heard.

'And, as matters stand, it seems that I have come only just in time,' he went on, talking with a strained attempt at gaiety. 'That trunk in the corner looks like business. When do you start?'

'I start on Wednesday.'

'Two days; well, I suppose you will manage to endure my society for that length of time—I promise to do my best. Let me begin by entertaining you at breakfast with my chamois adventures. You don't seem to have done half

justice to this delicious looking coffee, and to these most inviting rolls. By-the-bye, it occurs to me that I haven't breakfasted yet. I suppose I may ring for another cup? How often is it for the waiter? Once? Twice? Thrice?' He touched the bell without waiting for her answer. Lady Nevyll, lost in wonder at the strange demeanour of her husband, watched him silently from the depth of her sofa cushions. The whole thing was absolutely unprecedented in her experience.

The second cup promptly appeared, and Sir Gilbert, still talking spasmodically, began to pour out the coffee.

'This is really not half so bad for an hotel room,' he remarked, as he drew a chair to the table. 'The dark wall-paper makes it almost homelike. It is not unlike the wall-paper in the Morton dining-room. By the way, what are your plans for the winter? Don't you think,' he spoke almost diffidently, 'that we might try a winter at Morton for a change?'

'I am probably going to Florence,' said Lady Nevyll, slowly sipping her coffee.

'Florence? Yes, to be sure, your cough; Morton would be rather trying.'

He looked at her steadily for a minute.

'You are not looking well,' he remarked abruptly.

The delicate eyebrows went up. 'I have not known my looks to concern you for at least fifteen years.'

'You look pale,' he persisted.

'Thanks, I am as well as I ever am.'

'Then perhaps it is that colour that does not suit you.'

He spoke discontentedly, almost with a touch of irritation. The dressing-gown and the cap provoked him. In a vague way he realised that they were unbecoming, and that the fact of their being unbecoming made the task he had before him more hopelessly difficult. Charlotte should have appeared at her very best this morning. The searching gaze which he fixed on her face had nothing of the critical in it, it was not scanning the ravages which time had worked upon that once so exquisite countenance; rather, it was attempting to gather together the fragments of a beauty which, for however brief a space, had yet held

complete possession of his senses. With all his might he was striving to inflame his imagination by the light of memory. 'Her eyes are beautiful still,' he said to himself, with a curious sort of doggedness.

'Why do you never wear pale blue, Charlotte?' he asked aloud. 'It suits you best. You wore pale blue on the evening when I first saw you,' he hurriedly added.

'Good gracious, Gilbert, you are not going to become sentimental, are you? Whatever you do, please spare me reminiscences.'

Sir Gilbert dropped his coffee-spoon with a clatter and rose from his chair.

'No, let us have no reminiscences,' he said, in an altered tone. 'I don't want to speak of the past, but of the future. You wanted to know what I have come for—I have come to ask you whether we might not yet make a new beginning.'

'What *are* you talking about? A new beginning to what?'

'A new beginning to our lives, Charlotte; a fresh start; do you think it is too late for that? I have been thinking over it, and look here, I do believe that it might yet be time. We are not so very old yet; why should we not get to understand each other a little better than we have hitherto done? We might try, Charlotte, do you not think so?'

He spoke eagerly, hurriedly, almost stumbling over his words, with burning eyes and dry lips.

Lady Nevyll burst into a hysterical laugh.

'Really, Gilbert, this is becoming almost entertaining. I always knew that you were eccentric, but I never expected your eccentricity to take quite such an unlikely shape as this.'

Sir Gilbert coloured violently. He seemed about to make some quick retort, but checked himself, and spoke after a minute in a measured, patient tone, as though he were painfully schooling himself to calmness.

'I know, yes; of course, it must be very astonishing to you; that is only natural. I cannot expect you to enter into my ideas so quickly. You know nothing—that is to

say, it would be no use explaining. We have drifted so far apart that of course we cannot get to understand each other in a minute.'

'No, particularly as we have spent eighteen years in not understanding each other. Do you know, Gilbert, it is really very lucky that there are no English in the hotel? If you were seen in this frame of mind you might be suspected of wishing to make love to your wife, and that, of course, would be fatal to your London reputation.'

The flush on Sir Gilbert's forehead deepened.

'I know, I know, yes, I have given you the right to reproach me, Charlotte. I am ready to take all the blame on myself for the miserable estrangement between us. I was impatient and disappointed because you did not immediately enter into my ideas, because you were not—not exactly as I had taken it into my head that you must be—'

'Why do you not say at once, because you discovered that I had not married you for your own sake?'

'Charlotte, why will you put words into my mouth which were never there? Have I not told you that I reproach you with nothing? I daresay it was all my fault. But I am ready to begin again, if only you will let me. It can all be altered yet.'

'I see no need for any alteration,' said Lady Nevyll, indifferently. 'Things do very well as they are.'

Sir Gilbert pressed one hand hard within the other.

'Charlotte, can nothing move you? Do you not see that for me this is terribly serious? Only have a little patience; we have forgotten that we had meant to live for each other; but it will come back, with a little patience it will come back. What do you say, Chattie—shall we try?'

He had not called her 'Chattie' for close upon eighteen years. The word came strangely and uncertainly from his lips now; in the very fall of the syllables it betrayed that it had long lain unused.

'How can it come back,' said Lady Nevyll slowly, 'since it has never been?'

'Charlotte, you are wronging us both; I swear that I loved you when I made you my wife.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and cut open another page of the periodical beside her.

‘And if our love died out so quickly—’

‘*Our* love?’ she repeated, with a soft laugh.

‘Yes, yes, let me speak; let me say what I have to say. You may not have loved me as I loved you; but I cannot think otherwise; I *will* believe that I was something to you in those days. It did not last long, perhaps—perhaps you, too, were disappointed; but you meant to make me happy; you believed you could do so. I wasted my chance then, but now, Charlotte, now I want you to try again. I will trust you, I will believe in you; only be merciful and save me from myself.’

He approached the sofa while he spoke, and now bent over her, holding her cold white hand between his hot and throbbing palms. It seemed as though the fire must pass from him to her. But the long slender fingers remained like ice. The moment that his grasp relaxed the hand fell back on the cushion lifeless and inert. He knelt down beside the sofa and would have clasped his arms around her, but at their first touch she shivered and shrank back with a look that bordered on aversion.

‘This is too much,’ she said, her voice hoarse with sudden excitement. ‘What has put this freak into your head I do not know; but it is not one that I shall submit to. I suppose you are tired of amusing yourself and would like me to amuse you for a change.’

He rose to his feet with a sigh.

‘You have no heart,’ he said brokenly.

‘Do you think so? Well, you shall hear the truth; it needs the truth to convince you. I *have* a heart, but it belongs—not to you.’

‘Charlotte,’ he said sternly, ‘take care what you are saying. You do not know what you are driving me to.’

‘It is I who must speak now,’ panted Charlotte, sitting upright on the sofa, her thin hand nervously clutching the table-edge. ‘It must be said at last. You insist on believing that you *were* something to me at that time, eighteen years ago. Well, have your will; you were something to me; you were the wealthy Sir Gilbert Nevvill, and for this

reason—only for this reason—did I become your wife. I perjured myself—listen to this—I perjured myself when I swore to you, for I already loved another man, a man who was too poor and too ambitious to marry me, and whom I was too poor and too ambitious to marry. And listen, Gilbert,' and now her blue eyes caught fire, 'I love him still. My heart was his then, and it is his now. It never was yours—never for one moment. I married your riches, not you. I believed they would be a substitute for love, and from the moment that I discovered they were not, I hated you because of my mistake. I thought it would be a great thing to be the wife of a man with a title and with such a fortune, and to be the mother of his heir; but it was all a mistake; neither the title nor the fortune made up to me for the love I had renounced. I was not happy, and I had no child; it was all a failure, a wretched failure from beginning to end.'

The overstrained voice broke and the nervous grasp of the hand on the table-edge relaxed, as Lady Nevyll sank back among the cushions. The passionate outburst had ended in a flood of tears.

Sir Gilbert stood for a minute longer rigid beside the table. His pride had been wounded to the core, but the feeling of astonishment was greater than that of pain. Like a veil it fell from before his eyes. For eighteen years he had believed his wife to be a feeble, shallow, harmless, though selfish nonentity, as indifferent to his existence as he had long since become to hers. It was only in the minute when she started up to confront him, with her thin hand outstretched, and her sunken blue eyes blazing with a long-suppressed, never suspected hatred, that, as in a flash, he saw the true woman.

She had hated him all along; he understood that perfectly now. She had only not told him so, partly because it was too much trouble, and partly because he had never before attempted to force himself upon her. She was at the same time infinitely more important and infinitely more base than he had ever guessed. He was still listening to her words when already there rose up a contrasting image in his mind, and mercilessly he confronted the two pictures

—the woman who was hurling into his face the assurance that she had sold herself to him, and that other woman, whose pride stood so unflinchingly between him and her poverty, that he, the almighty millionaire, was powerless before her. Greater and stronger far the treachery of the creature before him, more womanly and more pure did Ulrica's image in this moment stand out in his soul.

'That will do,' he said after a time, in a tone from which all eagerness had died out. 'I think we understand each other perfectly now. It is just as well; it will avert all mistakes in the future. I regret having upset you thus needlessly. What is it that you are looking for? Your handkerchief? Shall I ring for your maid, or do you object to being seen with red eyelids? Oh, here it is on the ground!'

He handed it to her and walked to the window. The sight of Charlotte, half buried in her cushions and groping about for the missing handkerchief, produced in him a feeling of irritation. It was but a short time since that he had gazed on toil-worn hands and marked the throb of stern physical exertion. He turned from the window and walked to the table where he had laid his hat.

Lady Nevyl was lying with her face hidden in the cushions, weak as water after that unwonted flash of energy. Her energy was of the sort which never comes except in flashes—a sort which burns out more quickly than a firework. She could not be passionate except at the cost of great mental exhaustion. In all likelihood it would take her several days to recover the outlay of vitality which these last five minutes had required of her.

'Good-bye,' said Gilbert harshly. 'I am going. You need not fear to be troubled again for the present, perhaps never again. I do not think I shall return to England just now, so don't allow your movements to be tied. Shall I send you your maid?'

There was no answer, and she made no movement. He threw one more glance at the reclining figure, a cold, almost a contemptuous glance, then, without a further word, he gathered up his hat and gloves.

In the next minute he had closed the door of No. 45 behind him.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SECOND PARTING.

IT was the close of a wet, dark day, and Ulrica sat alone in the *Stube* of the Marienhof. She had finished her supper and pushed her plate aside. In the usual course of things the table would have been already cleared, and Ulrica herself would have been seated on the *Ofenbank*, busy with some piece of mending; but to-day her energy seemed to have flagged. Her arms lay inactive in her lap, her great grey eyes stared straight in front of her, full of a shadowy gloom. One solitary tallow candle in a pewter candlestick burned on the table, flickering fitfully in the draught, for it was a gusty evening, and the windows of the old house closed but imperfectly. The unstable light threw exaggerated black shadows upon the whitewash of the wall. The milk-jug which stood on the table reappeared there in the shape of a gigantic pitcher, swaying from side to side with the leaping of the flames; close beside it a big black blotch loomed unsteadily—it was the shadow of Ulrica's knitting-ball, which lay unheeded by her hand. Ulrica's own profile, with the silk handkerchief binding her forehead, covered about half the wall, like some grotesque and gigantic silhouette.

Outside the narrow circle of light everything was indistinct; the corners of the room and the angles in the rafter ceiling overhead were black as pitch. The big green stove in the corner was only to be distinguished as a block, and, with the red embers still glowing within it, might almost have stood for the portrait of some fabulous monster with one single fiery eye. Now and then a gust of wind came down the chimney, and then the monster seemed to be gurgling or groaning or even sobbing, and the fiery eye would gleam more fiercely for an instant and would then grow suddenly feeble. Once or twice at the sound behind her Ulrica looked over her shoulder with a start. Though she sat so still, her eyes betrayed a restlessness which in

general was foreign to her nature. She had passed several hundred evenings thus alone in the old house, and she knew by heart all the sounds which the wind was wont to make about the roof and about the eaves, how it would moan along the balcony overhead and rattle at the half-rotten window-shutters; but never until to-night had anything like fear come near her. Her heart beat with a strange expectation of something that was to come to pass.

It was scarcely ten minutes since the familiar rumble had passed her window, and the valley had echoed to the *trara* of the postilion's horn. That had been the last sound which could not be ascribed to the wind, and it was from the moment that the last note had died away among the hills that this fit of restlessness had grown acute, she could not have said why. Yesterday, too, and the day before, she had felt uneasy, but the strain had not been so intense as to-night. These taps on the window—she knew that it was only the long tendrils of the withered vine being blown against the pane, and yet she could not forbear to glance fearfully in that direction; those pattering sounds on the gravel—they could only be the falling leaves, heavy with wet; why, then, these sudden chills of terror which ever and again rushed over her?

'This is absurd!' she said at last, speaking aloud; 'I must be out of sorts. Why, I used to go into a dark room when I was eight years old, without thinking twice about it. It must be those noises, but I needn't listen to them.'

She began to sing, taking up her knitting at the same time. It was a *Volkslied* which had come into her head.

*'Seht Ihr die Rosse vor dem Wagen,
Und diesen jungen Postillon?'*

She had not got through the first verse when she broke off and laid down her knitting. She had just remembered that the door was not bolted for the night, and though there were no robbers at Glockenau, an unbolted door always remains an uncomfortable thing. She rose and went towards it, then with a sudden shiver of fear she stood still and seemed to be listening. Was that indeed only the fall of the wet leaves?

'Who is there?' she called out sharply, then held her breath and listened again.

The door was pushed open and a man came in and walked straight towards her. Before he had even reached the circle of light she knew quite well that it was Gilbert Nevyl. It could be no one else. Her heart gave one fierce bound of delight, then stood still, stabbed by a mortal pain. It took him only a few seconds to traverse the space of floor which divided them and to stand before her, and during these seconds their eyes were full upon each other.

'You should not have come back,' said Ulrica, after a long, breathless pause, during which, without speaking, he had looked into her face.

There was no attempt this time to take up the farce at the point where it had been dropped only two days ago. The comedy of friendship was played out. There was no pretence made on either side to misunderstand the situation. Sir Gilbert, on entering, had not held out his hand in the conventional manner, and Ulrica had uttered no conventional greeting. She knew now that she had all along been expecting this to happen. That nervous restlessness which had tormented her all the evening died out in an instant.

'You knew that I would come,' he said; 'you knew that we had not parted forever when I said good-bye to you the other day; it was impossible that *that* should be our parting; you knew it, Ulrica!'

'It was cruel of you to come,' she answered proudly, evading his glance.

'Not so cruel as Fate has been to us. It weighed on me like a burden; it broke my will; I had to come back to tell you—that which you know already. It must be said between us in so many plain words. I love you, Ulrica, you alone of all women in the world.'

'And is it because I am alone in the world,' said Ulrica, with quivering lip, 'that you think you have the right to tell me so?'

'Whether you are alone or not alone would make no difference. I scarcely thought of that; I did not stop to question myself as to whether this was the correct thing to

do; I only knew that it had to be done. Listen, Ulrica, there is much that I must tell you.'

'Tell me nothing; I do not want to hear; I will not listen.'

'Yes, you will listen,' said Sir Gilbert, with a curious icy quiet which beat down her resistance before it had well sprung into existence.

'Everything must be made clear between us. There must be no more of that ghastly nonsense of the other day. We did our best, but I think we are both at the end of our strength. A farce of that sort is unworthy of you and unworthy of me. Ulrica, I am going to tell you the story of my life.'

Ulrica had moved back to the table; she sat now in her old place, her head held high, a dangerous gleam in her half-veiled eyes, and a touch of disdain in the curve of her proud lips. She knew that there was no escape from that which was to come; she had resigned herself to listen, though she gave no sign of assent.

Sir Gilbert leant his two hands upon the table and began to speak. He told her the history of his youth, of his marriage, of his disappointment, disguising nothing, taking upon himself all the blame of his spoilt existence. He spoke steadily, almost soberly; but for the terrible pallor of his face and the hollows around his haggard eyes, his quiet might have been mistaken for calmness. He looked at her while he spoke, almost unremittingly, except that now and then he appeared to recollect himself, and his gaze was turned forcibly aside, only to return within the same minute to the hungry contemplation of her face.

'This is the first part of the story,' he said, with an attempt at a smile, when he had spoken of the estrangement between his wife and himself, 'the second part began on the day when I saw you, Ulrica. I have told you that I had given up fighting, I believed that all ambition within me was dead, but on that day I discovered that this was not true. You were a revelation to me. I had not known you for two days before I knew that you were the woman whom I had been looking for all my life.'

'You should have gone then, after those two days,' said

Ulrica, not quite so steadily; 'you should have gone immediately, and—you should not have deceived me.'

'Ulrica, it is difficult for you to understand; I scarcely know how I can expect you to believe me, but I swear to you that there was no thought of deception in my mind. I have told you that my wife does not in any way figure in my life, much less does she figure in my conversation. Our lives are spent apart; it never even occurs to me to speak of her, just as little as she would think of speaking of me.'

'But after those two days, when you knew—how it was to be, then you should have spoken.'

'I should; I am guilty, but not so guilty as you think. My silence was a mere yielding to the spell of the moment. I allowed myself to drift without thought of harm in my mind. Ulrica, can you not understand this?'

She sat in sullen silence; the rising and falling of her breast betrayed her growing agitation.

'Can you not understand?' he said again.

'I understand that you found it convenient to be silent.'

'This is hard; perhaps I have deserved it. You call me cruel, and yet you are ten times more cruel yourself. But this cannot stop me; you must hear me to the end. You must understand everything, there must not be even the shadow of a veil between us. I want you to know not only that I love you, but that, though I have a wife, and though according to conventional rules I have no right to tell you what I am telling you, yet my love for you is the highest and holiest instinct of my life. I have never known what love such as this meant until I met you, just as I never knew what a woman could be until you taught me. You have shown me a new world, I know now what I could have accomplished with you by my side. You are beautiful, but it is not your beauty alone which has conquered me, it is your womanly greatness. It is not true that which you told me that first day when we sat in the forest—do you remember?—about your being a tyrannical character, that it was this which drew you down to these poor, stupid peasants; that is a calumny, you do

not know yourself. It is because you are so generous and so true, because you have the energy of a man and the heart of a woman, that you became their Providence. You could not rest until you had relieved their poverty with some of your riches—for you are richer than I am, Ulrica, far, far richer. You have things which I would gladly buy with the whole of my fortune. You are my Providence as well as theirs—these peasants; you are the accomplishment of all my dreams. Oh, if you could have pity on me!’

The last words were like a cry that had escaped him against his will. He had left his position by the table as he spoke, and moved round to where she sat. Now he was standing beside her, he was bending towards her as though to read her face.

Ulrica was trembling violently; her wide-open eyes expressed a growing terror; she sat as though in a trance, her breath coming fast.

‘Tell me that you understand me, tell me that you believe me,’ said Sir Gilbert.

All at once, with a cry Ulrica started to her feet.

‘No, no, it is not true, I do not believe you, it is not thus that you think of me! You have played with me from the beginning.’

The fear which rang in her voice was not fear of him, it was fear of herself. The depth of her own pain terrified her—was it possible that she would grow weak? ‘It has all been unfair to me, unfair from the very beginning,’ she went on, speaking quickly and breathlessly, as though in fear of being interrupted. ‘You knew what you were doing, I did not; you must have seen how it would end, I could not; you should have spared me by going away long, long before it came to this. But of course,’ her voice trembled passionately, ‘it would be too much to ask any man to cut short a pleasant pastime merely that a woman should be spared. Oh, do not interrupt me; it is no child you are speaking to, I have seen the world, I know it. You tell me nothing new when you tell me I am beautiful. I have been told that before, often; I have seen it written in men’s eyes, so often and so plainly, that I

have got to hate my own face. Why should you be more blind than the others? You are the rich Sir Gilbert Nevyll, and I am homeless and alone—what should prevent you from indulging a whim? What is it to you whether my peace is destroyed forever, so long as you have had the necessary excitement to tide you over the autumn, without time weighing on your hands? You talk of loving me, perhaps you do, I don't know; but you will forget, for you the world is full of the means of forgetting; you will find other amusements, there are other beautiful women in the world. While I—oh, leave me,' she cried vehemently, 'I have been insulted before, but never so cruelly!'

She stopped, with her blazing eyes full upon him. At this moment she felt almost strong, almost safe. She had intoxicated herself with the sound of her own words.

'This is unjust,' said Gilbert slowly, 'and it is unreasonable. I have played no game with you. Of what do you accuse me? If I were the heartless libertine you would have me be, should I not be pleading my cause? Have I asked you for the smallest token of your favour? I know that you are too proud and too strong to be won thus. I know that you love me, and I know that you are as unattainable to me as though you dwelt upon a star up there in the heavens. I have not come to force my love upon you, but to relieve my mind of the burden which pressed upon it. I have come to say good-bye before I go heaven knows where—not back to my home,' and he shuddered, 'I am done with that caricature of a marriage which has turned my life into an absurdity. But I could not go without telling you that I am yours, body and soul, forever. I could not say this to you two days ago, because two days ago I had a wife, or thought I had one; now I know better—there is a woman who has the right to bear my name,—that is all. I shall never forget. One word of yours will call me from the end of the world—but you will not say it; I hope for nothing, I have told you. I see nothing before me but the old empty life, more hideously empty since it was filled by you, the emptiness covered up with the old gilding of money. I used to make jokes about my money, about being bothered by it—do you

remember? That was all nonsense. It is only now that I loathe it from the bottom of my heart, since I cannot divide it with you. It is terrible for me to be rich while you are poor. It has nearly killed me to look on at your fight with hands tied. Often during these past weeks I could have snatched up those poor toil-worn fingers and covered them with kisses. Ulrica, is it impossible that I should help you? No, do not answer—you will let me do nothing, it would be a fresh insult. Say one word to me before I go!’

‘I have nothing to say, I have said everything, I will not listen to more.’

The convulsive trembling had come over her again. ‘The only mercy you can show me is to go at once, and never, never come back.’

‘Never, unless you call me.’

She did not say in words, ‘That will never be,’ but the answer stood engraven around her tight-set lips.

The candle in the pewter candlestick had burned almost to its socket. Sir Gilbert took it up, and, holding it above his head, gazed intently into her face, as though he were busily printing off on to his memory every smallest line of her features. In the imperfect and strangely distributed light the black shadows about his eyes and his temples appeared unnaturally deep. Drops of moisture stood upon his forehead.

After a minute he put back the candle on the table, then, with a sigh that was almost a groan, he stooped, and lifting the hem of the coarse linen apron which covered her dress, he pressed his lips upon it.

No further word was spoken between them. At the door he turned—there was a long question in the look. Ulrica stood immovable, her gaze fixed on the wall opposite.

Leaving the door open behind him, Gilbert went out into the black night.

Still Ulrica stood as he had left her. Through the open door stray leaves, blown by the wind, came whirling over the floor up to her very feet. The slight rustle seemed to rouse her. Her immobility relaxed. She sank down on

her knees beside the chair, and buried her face in her arms. Then she raised her head to listen. His footsteps were dying away on the gravel of the path, they had not yet reached the gate. She realised suddenly that he was not yet quite lost to her; she had only to raise her voice. One word would bring him back—he had said so. With a shudder she put her hands over her ears, to shut out the sound of those footsteps. Her teeth were tightly set as though to keep back the cry that was struggling to rise.

Thus she remained for many minutes, and did not dare to stir until she had gained the certainty that there was no movement and no sound outside but that of the wind, which still played with the window-shutters, and sweeping in now unchecked, had all but extinguished the remains of the tallow candle on the table.

CHAPTER XX.

DECEMBER EIGHTH.

THE first few days after her cousin's second departure from the village were spent by Ulrica in a state of impassibility so deep as to border on apathy. That complete exhaustion, both bodily and mental, which seldom fails to follow upon intense excitement had mercifully descended upon her. It was like a short respite.

With the gradual return of her strength her real suffering began. Her greatest support in these days was her indignation. She carefully cherished this indignation, feeding it with every scrap of evidence which seemed to prove her cousin's guilt, fanning it into flame with continual appeals to her wounded pride, her injured dignity.

'A way to kill time, it was nothing but that to him,' she obstinately repeated; 'he has burnt his fingers at the game, that is all. I trusted him so entirely, but he is like all the others.'

Think and surmise as she would, she could not imagine

what her future was to be. What could possibly happen next? Life seemed to have come to a dead standstill; would she die soon, or would she live to be old at Glockenau, would she gaze on these pine forests until her eyes grew dim? Would she end by going in and out of the Marienhof leaning on a stick? And would all that had happened this autumn appear as unreal as a dream dreamed long ago? And then would she at last be laid to rest in that same churchyard where her father slept?

Her father! The thought of him struck her with a sudden reproach. No, of course she must not die yet, she must live at least till the object of her life was fulfilled, till his name was cleared. It had become very indistinct of late, that object, she had all but lost sight of it. But now it must be taken up again with tenfold energy, since it was all that remained to her to live for. If she could work so hard that at the end of each day she should absolutely be too tired to think, then it would be possible to face the prospect of the long winter evenings in the *Stube* of the Marienhof, when the ghosts of her brief happiness would slink out of the dark corners and crowd around her in her loneliness.

Autumn was fast turning into winter, though no snow had fallen yet. A succession of sunless misty days had set in. Every tree in the valley that was not a pine tree shivered naked in the November blast. The hedges which divided the gardens were so carefully stripped of their last leaf and stiffened to such a nicety by the frost that the wind could play upon them with its slightest breath, as though it were sweeping the strings of a well-tuned harp. The numberless little frothy streams which had sung so merrily through summer days and all through the still summer nights were now so choked with yellow leaves that all they could do was to trickle hoarsely.

November passed in one dead level of monotony. December appeared with as dead a face and as monotonous a gait. At the Marienhof the only two events of the day were the rising and the setting of the sun, that is the beginning and the ending of work. Thus passed the first, the second, the third, there seemed no reason to doubt that it

would go on thus to the thirty-first. On the eighth, much against her inclination, Ulrica was forced to rest from work, for the eighth is a feast day consecrated to the Virgin, and scrupulously observed in Austria. Such a day stands in the rustic mind far higher than a Sunday, and Ulrica could not dream of scandalising the Glockenau mind by the spectacle of the Grafín doing servile work on the feast of the Immaculate Conception. Hitherto she had carefully avoided those spots which were more closely associated with her cousin's visit, but to-day, being compelled to idleness, some irresistible force drew her, almost against her will, to the pine forest, and once she was in the forest to the spot where she had sat with him last on the day when she had learnt of his wife's existence.

Dead silence reigned now in the forest sanctuary, for the first touch of frost had been enough to arrest that tiny thread of water which slipped over the rock. The answering voices were hushed. The fringe of ferns on the old mill-wheel was now replaced by a fringe of icicles; the grass was flattened and frost-bitten. Of the cyclamen that had once strewn the spot she could not even distinguish the seed-pods, but a few of the yellow ragworts—not yellow now but brown—still stood upright like extinct torches; some of them indeed had had their necks broken by the wind and ruefully dangled their injured heads.

Beside the two millstones Ulrica stood still; they too were coated with ice and plastered over with leaves that had frozen where they fell. Upon one of the rocks in the stream, high and dry above the channel of the water, an irregularly round, brownish-black object was lying. Ulrica went close to the edge of the bank and looked at the round thing keenly. It was the cyclamen wreath which she had worn for a few minutes, now lying just where she had flung it when she left the spot. The blackened stalks with the clump of ice which had gathered above them might almost have been taken for some precious relic preserved under glass.

She turned and walked quickly back to the village. No, she would not go to the forest again, there were too many ghosts there, more even than in the *Stube* at home.

Next morning a letter was brought to the Marienhof. It was nothing but a few final words of farewell from Gilbert Nevyll, bearing the date of the day before and the postmark of Vienna. He had not been sufficiently master of himself to write sooner, he explained, but, before leaving Austria, he wished to bid her good-bye once again. He was going to travel in the East, for how long he did not know.

Ulrica locked away the letter and went about her work. Towards dark she set off to inquire after the health of one of her patients in the village. This patient lived at the extreme upper end of the street, and Ulrica, both in coming and going, had to pass by the door of the 'Golden Sun.' When she passed it the first time, the little square building looked exactly as comfortable and as sleepy as usual, the open doorway was unoccupied, and only a distant sound of pans being scoured issued from the kitchen region. But when Ulrica came down the street again all this was changed. The 'Golden Sun' seemed suddenly to have started wide awake. Even from a distance, and in spite of the dusk, Ulrica could see quite a crowd collected at the door. In the first instant this did not strike her as unusual, for this was the hour at which the *Stellwagen* arrived in Glockenau, and its appearance was generally sufficient excuse for the loiterers in the village street to collect. There were more loiterers than usual to-day, perhaps that was all. Perhaps one of the poor old post-horses was down on the ice, or perhaps the *Apfelbauer* had come back from his trip to the plain, where he had gone in hopes of making a good bargain for his apples.

But the nearer Ulrica drew to the 'Golden Sun' the more forcibly did it strike her that there must be some greater cause for the excitement. Even had both post-horses been down, and even had the *Apfelbauer* made ever so miraculous a bargain, this could not account for the dimensions which the crowd was rapidly assuming. From the doors of houses all along the street people were running to join the group. That the excitement was in some way connected with the arrival of the *Stellwagen* was, however, quite clear. Ulrica, as she approached, could distinguish the yellow monster in the centre of the crowd.

The horses were not down, they stood with lowered heads and steaming flanks. No one seemed to be thinking of unharnessing the tired brutes. Neither was the *Apfelbauer* visible anywhere; the person who seemed to be commanding the general attention was the man who acted as guard. He stood on the doorstep, conspicuous in his faded blue dress, gesticulating incessantly and tugging occasionally at the strap by which his leather money-pouch was slung from his shoulder, as though to give more weight to his words.

It would be time enough to hear what had happened to-morrow, thought Ulrica, and she kept to the further side of the street, hoping to pass by unobserved in the dusk. But just as she was opposite to the door of the inn, one word, pronounced with a peculiarly shrill distinctness by the man in the blue coat, reached her ear. It was a word which particularly struck her attention, for it was the word *Vienna*, and all day long, do what she would, her thoughts had been full of Vienna. Her steps slackened unconsciously, and she strained to hear more. 'Vienna—terrible castastrophe'—came again.

Ulrica hesitated for a moment, then turned back and crossed the street towards the inn-door.

'What has happened?' she asked one of the men on the outskirts of the group, a small shrivelled person who was craning his neck, and holding his shrunken hand trumpet-wise to his ear, at the same time that he was groaning prodigiously.

'What is he talking about?'

'Holy Mary, I don't know; my hearing has never been good since the flood, and I can't get near enough to hear the words, but it must be something dreadful by the way he waves his arms. Perhaps it is another flood somewhere else,' he suggested, with a happy thought.

'Make room for the Graf in,' said some women alongside, and the good-natured peasants immediately cleared a passage, so that Ulrica was enabled to approach within a few yards of the speaker. At that moment he was pausing to draw breath and at the same time to wipe his forehead with a checked cotton handkerchief.

‘What is it that has happened?’ asked Ulrica, addressing herself directly to him.

The guard was familiar with the Graf in by sight, and he respectfully touched his hat.

‘The most dreadful misfortune that has ever been heard of in Vienna, Graf in—’

‘Or in the whole of Austria, either,’ emphasised the postilion from the box, where, having thrown the reins on the horses’ backs, he was smoking his pipe with an air of quiet enjoyment, removing it only occasionally from between his lips in order to back up the guard’s remarks with a corroboration of his own, which invariably magnified to at least double its value the weight of the fact just announced.

‘It is a terrible fire which took place last night. They say that hundreds of people are burnt to death.’

‘Thousands,’ remarked the impassible postilion from the box, without taking the trouble to turn his head.

‘Holy Virgin, to think of there being a house big enough to hold thousands of people!’ ejaculated some one in the crowd.

‘But a theatre is not like a common house,’ corrected another.

‘It is a theatre, then, that is burnt down?’ asked Ulrica, changing colour suddenly. ‘Which theatre?’

‘The big theatre in Vienna, Graf in; it is burnt to the ground.’

‘Listen to the man,’ cried the landlady of the ‘Golden Sun’ who stood close by. ‘He talks of *the* theatre, as though our *Kaiserstadt* had only one playhouse for folks to amuse themselves in. As if my Franzl himself had not been in three different theatres when his regiment was in Vienna two years ago! Why, they have at least a dozen theatres there.’

The postilion removed his pipe from his lips and spat once with such artistic neatness and with such nice calculation of space and distance as to clear both horses by a line. ‘Several dozen,’ he then remarked, before taking his next puff.

The guard appeared somewhat discomfited. Evidently his inclination to harangue the multitude was greater than his knowledge of the facts.

'It is one of the big theatres,' he vaguely explained, attempting to veil his ignorance by a bewildering superfluity of gesture, 'but we didn't stop long enough at S—— to hear the name. The whole town is full of it there. They say that many people jumped out of the windows into the street, and the corpses that were fetched out were burnt as—as—'

'Tar,' suggested the postilion.

'It was burning still this morning, they say; perhaps it is burning now, they were afraid the whole street would catch fire. Good Lord!' cried the dramatically inclined guard, with a final tug which wrenched the long-suffering cord in two, 'for anything we know all Vienna may be in flames while we are standing talking here.'

There was a long-drawn 'A-a-h!' of horror, and some of the group turned instinctively to where the horizon was visible, and gaped terror-stricken at the evening sky, as though expecting to see there the red reflection of the monster fire.

'Blessed Saints!' exclaimed the round-faced landlord of the 'Golden Sun,' who until now had pronounced no opinion on the subject under discussion. 'If the whole of Vienna is burnt down, where will the Kaiser live?'

'Stuff and rubbish!' briskly responded his wife; 'they won't let it burn down; what have they got firemen and water-pumps for, I should like to know?'

'It's a pity we couldn't send them some of our water three months ago,' grinned a youth who set up for a wit. 'We had more than we wanted in August.'

But there was no response to the well-meant joke; the Glockenau imagination, inflamed by the guard's glowing word-pictures, would scent nothing but tragedy in the air.

'Good Lord!' cried an old woman who seemed to have been seized with a sudden access of terror, 'to think that my Nandl was in Vienna with her *Herrschaft*, not more than six months ago! Supposing she was there still, and supposing she had gone to the play last night! O Lord, O Lord, what a terrible way to die,' and she began to whimper helplessly.

'You may as well stop that crying,' broke in the ener-

getic landlady, with a touch of irritation; 'do you suppose your Nandl could have caught fire six months in advance? I might as well be wringing my hands because of my Franzl having been in Vienna two years ago. You're a fool, Kathi Hinzmaier, take my word for it that that's what you are!'

But even this opinion, pronounced in the tone of the most profound conviction, failed to reassure Kathi Hinzmaier. The poor old body could not recover from the violent 'tremble' into which she had fallen.

'Ah, it is all very well for you to speak,' she would sigh in answer to all soothing assurances. 'Your heart is not in it. Oh, it is easy to speak when you have got no one at the place of the fire.'

Ulrica had heard all that she wanted to know. Detaching herself from the group, she pursued her way home. On reaching the Marienhof she merely paused to place her basket on a bench and to strike a match, then went straight to her old trunk, in which everything which she at all valued was kept under lock and key. The letter she had received in the morning was lying just under the lid; she took it out, and carrying it to the table, sat down to read it through carefully once more. Her eyes flew along the lines till they came to this passage:

'I leave to-night, and hope within the next forty-eight hours to have turned my back on Europe for a good while to come. Possibly I may try Constantinople for a little first; I am told that Oriental veils and black eyes have a wonderful power of prompting forgetfulness of other things. You see that I am doing my best to fulfil your prophecy. I have been to the play almost every day this week; I shall probably go again to-night—on my way to the station. I don't understand more than every tenth word they say, but it's better than being alone with myself in the hotel smoking-room or walking the streets until the hour for my start comes.'

This morning, when Ulrica first read the letter, this passage had struck her only because of the clue which it gave to Gilbert's state of mind; now, however, she was reading it with different eyes. He spoke of going to a theatre

that night—last night—and it was last night that the fatal fire had taken place. She looked at the date again; yes, there could be no doubt; his letter was dated December 8, 1881, that date which has since attained such a mournful celebrity, which will ever be marked with black in the mind of every Viennese and of most Austrians.

A sense of uneasiness had come over Ulrica. The strange coincidence—it might be nothing else—awoke a dim foreboding. Looking at the matter with coolness and reason, the sudden fear which had taken possession of her must indeed have appeared but insecurely grounded. Ulrica told herself this, but without being able to regain her equanimity. She attempted to tell herself as well that her cousin's fate could in no way concern her, but the thought died in the forming, the lie was too palpable to deceive her even for a moment. The exclamation of Nandl's foolish old mother came back to her mind. 'Ah, it is easy for you to speak, your heart is not in it, you have got no one at the place of the fire.' She felt as powerless as that illogical old woman to throw off the load of fear which had fallen on her.

Herr Pfanner, the schoolmaster, took a daily paper, and proved willing to place it at the Graf's disposal, but only for one hour, by the clock, this rigorous limit being necessary because of the number of his acquaintance to whom he had promised to read aloud the latest news from Vienna.

The reports of the catastrophe had not been exaggerated, or scarcely so; of this Ulrica convinced herself by her first glance at the paper. 'The *Ring Theatre* in flames.' This was the first heading which met her eye. It was the *Ring* then. For an instant she breathed more freely. If it had been the *Opera* that had been burnt down, or the *Burg*, then the chances of her cousin having been at the scene of the fire would surely have been greater. So she fancied at first, but the thought followed fast: 'If he has been to the play almost every day, he will have been to the other theatres first.' She went on reading with strained attention. The first report was dated December 8th, 7.25 P.M. 'The *Ring Theatre* is in flames, a catastrophe is apprehended.'

'7.40. As the fire commenced previous to the raising of the curtain, it is hoped that a catastrophe will be averted.'

'8 o'clock. All hopes of averting a catastrophe have been abandoned. The first corpses have been brought out of the burning house. The windows are blocked with women shrieking for help. An indescribable excitement is raging through Vienna.'

'9 o'clock. Twenty dead bodies have already been removed. There seem grounds to fear that the number of victims is not yet exhausted.'

'9.50. It is certain now that more than fifty persons have perished. The attempts at rescue are being continued unremittingly.'

'10 o'clock. The number of victims has risen to over a hundred.'

'Midnight. It is absolutely impossible at the present moment even approximately to fix the number of persons who have lost their lives, but there seems little doubt that not less than three or four hundred will have perished. Owing to the holiday the theatre was more than usually crowded.'

Ulrica took back the paper to the school-house, punctually at the end of the hour. Next day she presented herself as punctually in order to carry away the one which had newly arrived. She looked at nothing but the report of the fire. The catastrophe seemed to be assuming ever larger dimensions. The most ghastly details were given; the firemen who had penetrated into the interior of the building brought back tales of horror; dead bodies had been found still burning like tinder; in one of the passages, jammed up against a locked door, eighteen persons had been discovered, some with features still recognisable, others so horribly charred that the bracelets or watch-chains they wore presented the only means of identification.

On this day and the next, and for many following days, the paper was full to overflowing of these blood-curdling pictures. Day by day Ulrica walked down to the school-house to fetch the new number; with blanched cheeks she scanned the lists of the dead that had been identified, and

breathed more freely when she reached the last name. There was no word in all the reports which could give her cause either to hope or to fear, yet she took a morbid interest in reading them all down to the last line; and by dint of dwelling on the many descriptions given of that night of terror she came almost to feel as though she had herself been a spectator of the tremendous scene. She went about her work, indeed, as usual in the Marienhof, but it was only with her hands that she worked, her mind was far away. The horn-signals of the firemen rang incessantly in her ears, and upon everything at which she looked there seemed to lie a reflection of that glow which had painted the night red on that terrible 8th of December.

CHAPTER XXI.

'WHAT NEXT?'

ONE evening, about the middle of December, an elderly personage who spoke no German, and who did not appear to be used to travelling, alighted at the door of the 'Grand Hotel' in Vienna.

A fur-clad porter and a waiter with a snowy shirt-front, and an unspeakable dignity of demeanour, advanced simultaneously to open the cab-door.

'Is the room engaged?' asked the waiter in German; then, having cast a keener glance at the traveller, he repeated his question in what, no doubt, he considered to be English.

'Haf you commanded an apartment?'

'No, there is no room engaged.' The Englishman did not yet move from his seat. 'I must first know whether I am at the right place. Is there a man called Kennedy staying at this hotel?'

'Kenneti? *Ach*, surely!' A shade of interest crossed the countenance of the magnificent waiter, giving it a touch

of something distinctly human. 'You speak of the valet of the English Sir?'

'Of Sir Gilbert Nevyl—yes.' The stranger looked hard at the waiter as he alighted. 'Is there any news of him?' he asked, in a voice which was by nature somewhat harsh and grating, and which possibly the desire to conceal any appearance of anxiety may have rendered at this moment a shade more grating than usual.

'We have no news of the English Sir,' replied the waiter, who had become himself again, and who, with a movement as dexterous as it was discreet, had relieved the traveller of the small leather bag which he held in his hand, and to which he had attempted to cling with some of the average Britisher's disinclination to yield into strange hands all he possesses.

'Oh, please do not incommode yourself,' as the elderly gentleman pulled out his purse. 'We will see that the gab is baid out.' This was said in the sort of tone that makes people feel that they have just been on the verge of committing some painfully undignified, not to say indecent, act.

'Will you show me to a bedroom and then send the valet to me?' began the stranger with punctilious civility, despite his grating voice; but before he had proceeded further there appeared from behind one of the huge pillars of the entrance a man with a scared, white face and red whiskers, who made a sort of terrified rush towards the entering figures.

'O Mr. Dunnet, O sir!' was all that Kennedy could utter. 'Oh, thank God, sir, that you have come!'

'Tut, tut,' said Mr. Dunnet, with a somewhat startled glance at Kennedy's pale face, 'it's not so bad as that, is it? Wait till we are alone, Kennedy.'

'If the gentleman desires to make inquiries,' suggested the waiter, 'perhaps he will confer with Herr Krenner.'

'Who is Herr Krenner?'

Herr Krenner, it appeared, was the business manager of the establishment.

'That will do later on; I must have Kennedy's version first. Show me to a room, please, and, Kennedy, keep close.'

There was no need to tell Kennedy to keep close. So close, in fact, did he slink at Mr. Dunnet's heels on the way upstairs, that he twice had his toes severely trodden upon.

While the dainty-looking housemaid was noiselessly busied with the porcelain stove, Mr. Dunnet paced the floor with his hands in his pockets and his overcoat only half unbuttoned—for the atmosphere of the dismal apartment was something like that of a cellar—and Kennedy stood rigid beside the table, following that gentleman anxiously with his eyes, as though in fear of seeing him vanish into thin air.

'Now, Kennedy, let me hear what this is all about,' began Mr. Dunnet as soon as the door was closed behind the housemaid. 'I did not half understand your telegram. Speak quietly, man; there is no hurry, and we must have no confusion.'

Mr. Dunnet, as he spoke, took up his position with his back to the stove, and threw his overcoat a little further open. He was a tall, spare man, something on the wrong side of fifty. All the hair which he had grew in two distinct wisps, beginning behind his ears and striving to join above his bald forehead in a manner which suggested an eternal laurel-wreath. In the general course of things he would have been clean-shaved, but it was evident from the suggestive cloud about his chin, as well as from the slight disarrangement in the iron-grey laurel-wreath, that he had travelled day and night. Kennedy, who knew that Mr. Dunnet was most precise and particular in every point that regarded personal appearance, was able to estimate the fact of his showing himself with a stubbly chin at its proper value. It meant that he was fully alive to the gravity of the situation.

'It was this way, sir,' began the valet, evidently making a great effort to speak with some composure. 'We were to leave Vienna that night—'

Mr. Dunnet raised his hand.

'Stop a bit, we must go further back than that. Where did you find Sir Gilbert when he wrote for you to join him?'

'In this same hotel, sir. It is not a fortnight ago that I

got out, sir. We were to go somewhere East—to Constantinople, I believe.'

'Yes, that was the direction he gave for his letters when he wrote for that last thousand pounds,' remarked Mr. Dunnet, more to himself than to Kennedy. 'By-the-bye, the cheque came all right, I suppose? I had no acknowledgment. Do you happen to know whether Sir Gilbert cashed a cheque within the last fortnight?'

'Yes, sir, he did. I heard him speaking to the gentleman who is at the head of the establishment about the cashing of that cheque.'

'That's all right, then. And now, as for my first telegram—do you know whether it reached Sir Gilbert's hands before—before the evening of the 8th?'

'No, sir, he never got the telegrams. I have them both here,' and Kennedy pulled out an enormous and highly respectable pocketbook, out of which he produced two telegrams, one of them still smooth and crisp, the other obviously much 'fingered'—both still unopened.

'Then he knew nothing of Mr. Nevyl's illness?'

'Mr. Nevyl, sir? Oh, I am sorry, sir,' said Kennedy sincerely. 'It isn't bad, is it, sir?'

'It was so bad that when I sent my second telegram I scarcely expected Sir Gilbert to get home in time. But there has been a rally since; he had taken some food before I left.'

'Good Lord, as bad as that! Sir Gilbert gone, and now Mr. Nevyl! Bless my soul, Mr. Dunnet,' exclaimed Kennedy, in bewilderment, 'if they're both gone, who's to come next?'

'Tush, man, what are you talking about? Who says they're gone? Mr. Nevyl is dangerously ill, there is no doubt of that—it's a very much worse attack of inflammation of the lungs than the last was; and as for Sir Gilbert—well, they haven't *found him*, have they?' he asked abruptly. 'They told me there was no news.'

Kennedy shook his head, turning a shade paler.

'Where there is doubt there is hope,' said Mr. Dunnet, attempting to warm the sole of his right foot by holding it against the little brass door, which had scarcely yet lost

its chill. 'Go on with your story. When did you see Sir Gilbert last?'

'It might have been half-past six, sir. I had just done packing his things when he came into the room. He told me he had paid the bill and settled everything downstairs. I was to go straight to the station with the luggage, to be there sharp at a quarter before nine; Sir Gilbert would join me there—he was going to the play meanwhile. The telegram came just about ten minutes after Sir Gilbert had driven off. One of the hotel people took it after him. It *did* cross my mind as how there might be news in that telegram which might change Sir Gilbert's plans; but it got to be eight o'clock and more, and Sir Gilbert did not come back, nor the man who had taken the telegram either; and when they told me the cab was there, I couldn't do nothing but follow my orders, could I, sir?'

'And till what o'clock did you wait for Sir Gilbert at the station?'

'Till past ten o'clock, sir, until some English-speaking person told me that the only train that could take us to Constantinople was gone an hour since, after which I came straight back to the hotel, and then—' Kennedy broke off, and the scared look—the look of a man who has seen something terrible, from the sight of which he has not yet recovered—deepened on his face.

'Then what?' asked Mr. Dunnet, now occupied in toasting his left sole and throwing open his coat a little wider, either because the room was growing warmer, or because the narrative was deepening in interest.

'It was from then that it all began, sir. The first thing was that the head-waiter met me with the very same telegram in his hand which had been carried after Sir Gilbert, only that it was all crumpled and dirty, as you see it there. The theatre had been burning already when the man got there. And then, sir, I waited all night, thinking that Sir Gilbert was just the man to be helping them with the water-pumps, and that he would be back in the morning; but he has never come back since, and that's eight days back, and all I know, sir.'

'Why did you not telegraph to me eight days ago? If

I had been on the spot immediately after the event, it would have made the inquiries very much easier.'

Kennedy looked piteously at Mr. Dunnet.

'You see, sir, I was kind of frozen. It happened so unexpected that it didn't seem quite real. And then with every day I kept fancying that Sir Gilbert would just walk into the room. It was only when the second telegram came that I got woke up, as it were, and it came into my head that since I couldn't find Sir Gilbert for myself, you would be the only person who could come near to having a chance.'

It was clear that the catastrophe had been too much for Kennedy's nerves. In such emergencies as a belated appearance of his master's luggage or a button giving way just as the dinner-gong sounded, his presence of mind had always proved itself brilliantly equal to the occasion, but burnt-down theatres lay outside the circle of his experiences; he had not been trained up to face catastrophes with the same coolness as he could have faced the order to pack up within twenty minutes for a six-weeks' trip to Skye.

Mr. Dunnet walked silently to the table, and abstractedly stared into the flame of one of the candles which stood there.

'What steps have been taken as yet?' he asked, after a minute. 'Has any attempt been made to identify any of the victims with Sir Gilbert?'

The scared look returned to the valet's face.

'They did try that,' he resumed, his voice sinking a little. 'The gentleman as manages the hotel went the rounds of the hospitals himself in order to see whether Sir Gilbert was not lying somewhere among the wounded, and not able to speak for himself; and after that he took me with him to a place where the—the bodies were laid out, sir; all those they had found, leastways; it was the bodies of those persons who had not as yet been recognised. Most of them,' and Kennedy seemed to swallow something hard in his throat, 'hadn't much of a face remaining, but there was generally some part of the clothes or a watch-chain that wasn't quite melted to go by, and—'

'Well?' inquired Mr. Dunnet, finally divesting himself

of his overcoat, for all in a moment the room seemed to have grown oppressive. 'Was there anything that could give you a clue? Are you certain you overlooked nothing?'

Kennedy made an attempt to draw himself up.

'If there had been as much as half a boot of Sir Gilbert's within those four walls, I think I may safely say, sir, that I would have spied it out. It is my firm belief, sir, that Sir Gilbert was not among those—those unhappy persons.'

'And all the other bodies had been identified, you say?'

'So they told me.'

'Well, then, since he was not among the dead not identified, he was not among the victims.' Mr. Dunnet's tone was determinedly hopeful. 'What's the matter, man?' he added quickly, for the scared look on Kennedy's face had deepened to one of almost grotesque horror.

'That's not all, sir,' said the valet, in a hoarse whisper; 'those bodies there was not all. They say as how they buried thirty coffinfuls of—of *bits*, sir,' finished Kennedy, with a gasp. 'They couldn't noway tell what was what.'

Mr. Dunnet's hand went up again mechanically, and for a moment or two the family lawyer and the valet stared aghast into each other's horror-stricken faces. Then Mr. Dunnet sat down somewhat abruptly on the nearest chair. The object which at this moment rose most distinctly before his mind's eye was the marble mausoleum in the park at Morton Hall, within whose costly walls Sir Gilbert's father and grandfather were sleeping their last sleep, and wherein Sir Gilbert had never doubted that, on whichever spot of earth his last breath should be drawn, he himself would one day be laid to rest. And now—those thirty coffins, worse, far worse than nameless—was it possible? Mr. Dunnet put out his hand towards the caraffe on the tables, and hastily tossed off a glass of the delicious Viennese water.

'It was only yesterday, sir, that they buried them,' Kennedy was saying. 'A grand sight, they say; but I felt too sick even to go to the window. Over two hundred coffins, and the flowers just in cartloads. It would have taken a couple of hours just to have walked from one end of the procession to the other, so the head-waiter told me.'

'That will do, Kennedy,' interrupted the lawyer. 'I see that we have at least as much cause to fear as to hope, but as yet all the evidence is negative. I must see whether anything positive is to be found out in other quarters.'

To Herr Krenner, who next appeared on the scene, Mr. Dunnet introduced himself as the legal adviser of Sir Gilbert Nevyl and as the representative of the family, entrusted with the conducting of inquiries in this most distressing business.

What Herr Krenner himself could say was not much, but more important witnesses were promptly procured. There was, in the first place, the august head-waiter himself, who had been entrusted with the securing of the theatre-box. It was a box *au premier*; this he distinctly remembered, and, if his much burdened memory served him right, the number was either eight or nine. Then there was the porter who had given the coachman the order for the Ring Theatre. Finally, there was the coachman himself—for it was in a carriage belonging to the establishment that Sir Gilbert had started on that last drive—who had deposited Sir Gilbert in front of the Ring Theatre about ten minutes before seven o'clock. The coachman was undoubtedly the most important witness.

'Ask him,' said Mr. Dunnet to the head-waiter, who was acting as interpreter, 'whether Sir Gilbert went straight into the theatre after having alighted?'

Upon this point the coachman could give no assurance. There had been three or four carriages in front, and Sir Gilbert had alighted some yards from the entrance, but it certainly was his impression that the Englishman had gone straight towards the doorway.

'Impressions are all very well, but they are not proof,' thought Mr. Dunnet, as he mentally recapitulated the state of the case while he was laying himself down to his well-earned rest.

'Here we have a man who saw Sir Gilbert alight some dozen yards from the theatre entrance; the next step undoubtedly is to ascertain whether a person can be produced who saw Sir Gilbert actually inside the building. It has not yet been proved that he set foot within the theatre.'

There wanted ten minutes to the raising of the curtain. It is quite imaginable that Sir Gilbert might prefer to finish his cigar outside rather than sit for ten minutes in his box in solitary state. The fire broke out before the house was quite filled. There seems the ghost of a hope there; to be sure it doesn't explain the disappearance, but still—' At this point Mr. Dunnet's reflections lost their distinctness, for, despite the emotions of the last three hours, Nature would have her rights, and the tired traveller fell asleep.

Next morning, at an early hour, with polished chin and the iron-grey laurel-wreath newly burnished and symmetrically plastered over his temples, Mr. Dunnet set out for the site of the burnt-down theatre, where discoveries were still being daily made, and where it was just within the bounds of possibility that since yesterday something might have come to light which would render all further inquiries superfluous.

It was not a very long drive from the Grand Hotel to the site of the Ring Theatre, yet long enough to let Mr. Dunnet gain a distinct impression of the physiognomy of Vienna. It was an impression he never forgot. On the faces of the passers-by there lay a something which gave them a strange likeness to one another, a sort of family look called forth by the occasion; it was the reflection of the great panic which had convulsed the town only eight days ago. In many wide-open eyes a horror that had not yet been conquered was broadly written. There were people among those passers-by who had themselves been in the burning theatre, there were a few whose muff or the depth of whose pocket shielded a bandaged hand still barely recovered from the fire-wound with which they had been lucky enough to escape. There were some—they might have been counted by the dozen during that quarter-of-an-hour's drive—who wore brand-new mourning for near relations whom they had lost in the fire; there were more—these could have been counted by the hundred—who had stood in the crowd on the unhappy night, who had seen the bodies dragged out, who had shouted themselves hoarse in frantic words of encouragement to the wretches clinging half-mad with fear to the framework of

the windows, waiting to be rescued, and who had closed their eyes in order not to see how the fingers of the women who would not jump were wrenched from their hold upon the sills, and how fainting girls were flung by their more resolute fellow-sufferers into the safety-nets spread below. The horror of it all was upon them still—fixed upon their panic-stricken faces.

Oddly enough, it had for years past been a cherished wish of the hard-worked man of business to make acquaintance with the *Lustige Kaiserstadt*, where life flows so smoothly and spirits run so high, where the echoes of a Strauss waltz must surely be forever vibrating in the air, and where there is a sunshiny day for each of our foggy ones. A holiday trip in this direction had long been planned in his mind; but now, alas, that the wish had been so unexpectedly fulfilled, it was no joyful but a mourning city that he found. Instead of a Strauss waltz it was rather the cadence of Beethoven's funeral march with which the air seemed heavy, and sunshine and gaiety alike were extinguished by the shadow of that monster procession which had wound itself like a black serpent from one end of the town to the other. The baskets of the flower-vendors were but scantily filled—was it because it was December, or was it because every available flower had been forced open before its time to be bound into funeral wreaths?

Despite all the tales of horror he had heard, it was only when he stood between the four naked walls of what had once been the Ring Theatre that Mr. Dunnet was able to estimate the catastrophe at its full value. There was not much to see, and just for this reason it was worth seeing. Not a trace of stalls or boxes anywhere, nor anything but the most shadowy indication of where they had been—charred beams, charred planks, charred bricks, beds of ashes six feet deep and more, and everything open to the winter sky, for of the roof all but a fragment had long since fallen in. The air even now was still impregnated with smoke, and portions of the wall were still hot to the touch.

There was little work going on, for the discovery of

further bodies was considered improbable, and the final clearing away of the ruins could not be attempted until the place was thoroughly cooled down. Most of the men now at work were employed in sifting rubbish by throwing it in spadefuls through a coarse wire netting stretched horizontally between wooden poles. The various rings and watch-chains, in a more or less damaged state, which had come to light in this way since morning were produced for Mr. Dunnet's inspection. He turned them over and shook his head; there was nothing that could give him the slightest clue.

This negative result would undoubtedly have encouraged Mr. Dunnet, had it merely been retailed to him at second hand; but standing, as he now was, in the midst of this mountain-range of ruins, it could not fail to strike him, as he watched the men at their work, that after all it was very much like a gnat drinking out of the ocean, and certainly not more hopeful than the proverbial hunt for a needle in a haystack.

Mr. Dunnet's face was graver by several shades as he turned to leave the spot. Those blackened stones spoke very loud.

'Where do you wish to go next?' inquired the interpreter, who was acting as guide.

The next step, in Mr. Dunnet's opinion, was to ascertain whether Sir Gilbert had or had not been seen to enter the box which had been engaged in his name. An application to the ticket-seller of the burnt-down theatre having first cleared up all doubt as to the number of the box in question, there now remained only one single thing to do, and that was to appeal to the memory of Frau Pamperl, the box-keeper, she being absolutely the only person who could throw light on the required point.

It was a long, weary drive to the Leopoldstadt, where Frau Pamperl lived, followed by a long weary climb up stifling staircases. *Mutter* was in bed, announced the small boy who answered the summons, with his mouth full, for it was the universal dinner-hour for such as Frau Pamperl. She had been in bed with fright ever since the fire. Mr. Dunnet would have drawn back hastily, but perceiving by

the warmth of the invitation to enter that he was absolutely solitary in his view of the case, the English lawyer gathered his courage together, and blushing followed the interpreter into Frau Pamperl's sleeping apartment.

'Something about the fire, of course,' quavered the ex-box-keeper, rearing her meagre form from out of a perfect ocean of feather-beds. 'I've been able to answer all the questions as yet—my head is quite clear, it's only my legs that can't get over the shakiness yet. Poldi, you good-for-nothing,' she interrupted herself, with an energy which certainly spoke in favour of the clearness of her head, 'will you leave that cat alone directly? Just wait a bit till I can get at you!' for the small boy was diverting himself by forcing some beer-dregs down the throat of an unhappy grey cat.

'This gentleman wishes to know,' broke in the interpreter, 'whether you can remember opening the door of box No. 9 in the first row on the evening of the 8th?'

Frau Pamperl's forefinger travelled to her forehead.

'No. 9? I'll have it directly—my head is quite clear, you know, it's only my legs. I've got it now; yes, I certainly took the ticket and opened the door all right. It was one of the first boxes occupied that night.'

'And was it to a lady or a gentleman you opened the door?'

This was a sort of mild trap which the interpreter on his own responsibility was laying for Frau Pamperl's memory. But the ex-box-keeper was not to be tripped up so easily.

'A lady? Not a bit of it; a gentleman it was, and very much of a gentleman, too, seeing that he gave me a florin for no reason that I can think of. Would you just oblige me, sir, by giving that boy one good shake? So-o!' as the interpreter complied with alacrity. 'If any one will be glad when I get on my feet again, it'll be that cat!'

'Ask for his personal description,' said Mr. Dunnet, as the young heir of the Pamperls vanished with a howl into some back region.

With every reply interpreted to him the shade on Mr. Dunnet's face deepened. The occupant of No. 9 had been tall, broad-shouldered, he had a short brown beard,

was dressed in a grey suit, and spoke broken German. There was not one point missing, and for the accuracy of the description Frau Pamperl was prepared to vouch. There was nothing wrong with her head, as she again explained, it was only her legs.

Mr. Dunnet groped his way silently down the staircase, and the order was given for the Grand Hotel.

Kennedy was hanging about the passage as Mr. Dunnet stepped out of the lift. He looked at the lawyer with wistful inquiry, and at a sign followed him into the bedroom.

'Look here, Kennedy,' said Mr. Dunnet, as he sank wearily into one of the uncomfortable hotel arm-chairs, 'I am not prepared to say that all hope is gone yet; but I have just spoken to a person who saw Sir Gilbert enter his box that evening. I am afraid it is time for me to take his effects under my charge. Have you got the keys, or did Sir Gilbert keep them?'

'I have them, sir. There is nothing but his clothes and toilet articles in those boxes. He always has his money about him when we are travelling. There's some one knocking, sir.'

It was a messenger with a telegram. Mr. Dunnet signed the receipt and then slowly opened the paper. His countenance did not materially change as he read the two lines, but his voice sounded more grating than usual when after a minute he looked up and spoke, or rather uttered his thought aloud:

'The question now is,' he remarked, as he carefully folded up the telegram, 'is this the news of Mr. Nevvill's death, or is it Sir Ernest who died last night in Park Lane? And if it is Sir Ernest—what next?'

CHAPTER XXII.

CERTAINTY.

ULRICA had received a message to the effect that the *Apfelbauer* was dying. She had received similar messages on an average twice a week during the last month, so that the shock to her nerves was scarcely to be characterised as overwhelming. The good man had taken to his bed immediately on his return from the plain in December; it was February now, but he still kept between the sheets, and though Ulrica could see nothing beyond a certain 'achiness' about the joints, he persisted in believing that his constitution was undermined. On five distinct occasions had his children been collected round his bed in order to receive his last blessing, and had his weeping widow *in spe* been exhorted to remain faithful to his memory and to mind that the cross on his grave was at least an inch taller than that on the mound which covered the remains of the *Birnenbauer*, who had been his rival in life.

On this particular evening Ulrica, on entering the house, was confronted by the spectacle of the nine small *Apfelbauers* kneeling in a half circle before the picture of the Madonna in the corner of the room, a lighted taper being clutched in each small hand. It was a picturesque scene, and would have been considerably more touching than it was, if Ulrica had not happened only yesterday to have seen a whole family grouped in exactly the same way and praying with exactly the same fervour for the restoration to health of—a sick cow!

The *Apfelbauer's* joints were aching rather worse than usual to-day, and therefore it took Ulrica a longer time than usual to convince him that his dissolution was not imminent, and that there remained plenty of leisure for him to make any arrangements he might wish with regard to the measurements of the cross that was to mark his last resting-place. She was still occupied in discussing this

point with him—after having first blown out all the tapers and dismissed the much relieved children to their evening romp—when the door of the house was burst open by a breathless lad who had come in search of the Grafin.

There was a gentleman at the Marienhof, he declared, who had arrived by the *Stellwagen*, and who wished to speak to the Grafin immediately.

Ulrica rose quickly from her chair; the blood had rushed to her face, hot and irrepressible.

‘I will come,’ she said, in a voice which trembled. She knew of only one man who could possibly look for her here, in this corner of the world, and after all these weeks of wearing doubt, of dark uncertainty, what a relief to set eyes upon his face again, if only for one passing second, and even though at the cost of a worse pain to follow. Every other consideration vanished before this thought.

It was a clear, starry night as she stepped out into the street in the company of the small messenger, whose way home happened to be much the same as her own. The night was cold and the boy was taciturn, and though more than one question was burning on Ulrica’s lips, she could not at once summon courage to speak. One word might dispel the whole fabric of hope which had so suddenly sprung to life.

‘Are you certain that he—the gentleman—asked for me?’ she began at length, just as they came within sight of the Marienhof.

‘Eh?’ said the boy, issuing from his comforter; ‘to be sure they asked for you. I took them to the Marienhof and left them there.’

‘They?’ said Ulrica, her heart suddenly sinking. ‘Is there more than one gentleman? And did he—did they, I mean, not know the way to the Marienhof?’

‘Not a bit of it; he doesn’t even seem able to speak properly, the funny old gentleman. It was the *Herr Notar* who had to speak for him. The *Herr Notar* came with him in the *Stellwagen*.’

The stars which a minute ago had sparkled so clearly in the frosty air seemed all at once to be burning dull. A sense of disappointment which left no room for curiosity

had come over Ulrica. It was without any excitement that she reached the door of the Marienhof and opened it.

There were two people in the room. The one she saw first was the same leather-faced, sharp-eyed, sparrow-like individual who, after her father's death, had acted in the name of the law by placing the official seal upon his effects. The sight of his face carried her back with a sharp pang of memory to the day of the funeral. But surely some change had come over him since that day? She could not remember that she had on that occasion been honoured by so ludicrously profound an inclination as the one by which he now greeted her entry. What was the matter with the man?

The second person in the room was an elderly gentleman whom she had never seen before. He stood a little apart from the notary and was gazing around him with an air of mild stupefaction. Just as Ulrica entered, his attention was absorbed by the green stove, which he was contemplating from a respectful distance, as though not absolutely convinced that it might not explode if touched. Upon the table a small black leather bag was standing beside the pewter candlestick.

'You wish to speak to me?' asked Ulrica, standing still just within the doorway.

The elderly gentleman turned. He did not speak at once. He looked at Ulrica first and then at the notary. There was a perfectly distinct question in that glance, and the nod which the notary gave was a perfectly distinct answer. 'It is she,' the nod replied.

'I believe I am addressing Countess Eldringen?' said the stranger in English, and in a tone of unmistakable dismay. A minute ago, Mr. Dunnet—for it was he—as he gazed round at the rustic furniture and the whitewashed walls, had been saying to himself, with many a mental headshake: 'This will never do.' But it was only now, when, on turning, he found himself standing opposite to a young woman in full peasant costume, who was indicated to him as Countess Eldringen, that, for one minute, his native coolness threatened to desert him. With a deepening conviction he repeated to himself that really this would

never do at all, even while he was punctiliously bowing his head before the personage of whom in his secret heart he felt it his duty to disapprove.

‘I am Countess Eldringen. Will you please tell me who you are and what you have come for? My time is very much engaged. I cannot be at your disposal for more than five minutes,’ she added, with a glance at the clock. Oddly enough, she did not immediately guess at a connection between this strange Englishman and her cousin Gilbert Nevyl. She was still too much taken up with her disappointment to have cast about for an explanation of the visit.

At the imperiously spoken question Mr. Dunnet looked up more keenly. She was standing in the full light now, her proudly poised head and tall figure revealed. ‘There is no saying whether it may not do, after all,’ was the lawyer’s inward reflection. ‘Her accent is foreign, but it is not offensive, and, thank Heaven, her *h*’s seem all right.’

‘I am afraid it will take rather more than five minutes to explain to you the reason of my coming,’ he said aloud, while the shadow of a smile played round his clean-shaven lips. ‘My name is Dunnet. I have hitherto been entrusted with the management of the Nevyl property and—’

Ulrica made a quick step forward. ‘You have brought me a message,’ she said breathlessly.

‘I have brought you a—a piece of news,’ corrected Mr. Dunnet, ‘but, as I say, there are certain explanations which must precede the—the announcement I have to make. If you will be so good as to be seated for a few minutes, I hope to make the case clear to you.’

Mechanically Ulrica sat down on the chair which, with old-fashioned courtesy, Mr. Dunnet had placed for her. She felt that to comply would be the quickest way to get at the truth she was thirsting for.

‘I do not know,’ began the lawyer, who remained standing beside the table, ‘I do not know how far you are aware of the exact degree of relationship between yourself and the English family of Nevyl. Your grandmother—’

‘Yes, yes, I know, he is my cousin,’ broke in Ulrica.

‘Did he send you? Tell me quickly what you have to say.’

‘It is not Sir Gilbert Nevyl who has sent me,’ and a shade of surprise crossed Mr. Dunnet’s face, ‘if it is to him you refer—’

‘Then he is dead,’ said Ulrica, turning as white as wax up to the roots of her hair, as she rose from her seat. ‘I think I have known it all along. Tell me the truth: is my cousin Gilbert dead?’

‘I was not aware that there was any personal acquaintance,’ stammered Mr. Dunnet, entirely taken aback. Ulrica had clasped her hands before her face. At Mr. Dunnet’s remark she dropped them and cast a dazed glance around her. His astonishment had recalled her to herself.

‘No, to be sure,’ she said slowly, as she sat down again, ‘who says that I knew him? His death can be nothing to me. Did you say he was dead?’ and she looked with wide, grey eyes at the lawyer.

‘The duty of announcing his death to you is one of the reasons of my troubling you with my presence to-day.’

There was no perceptible change on Ulrica’s face this time; only the hands clasped in her lap were clasped a little tighter. For some moments she sat quite still, staring at the boards at her feet.

‘I fear I have been too abrupt,’ began Mr. Dunnet.

She raised her head with sudden fierceness. ‘What are you talking of? Why should you not be abrupt? What possible reason can you have for supposing—’ and an angry streak of red broke through the pallor of her cheek—‘that this—this news should agitate me? He was not—not a very near relation—I don’t even understand why you should announce it to me at all. Why should I need to know? Why are you here still? Have you anything more to say?’

‘I have this to say,’ said Mr. Dunnet, not moving from his place beside the table: ‘that in consequence of the extinction of the Nevyl line, you, as the nearest living relative, are the undisputed heiress to the entire Nevyl fortune.’

Ulrica looked blankly at the speaker. What he said sounded quite rational so far as grammar and phraseology were concerned, but the sense of it seemed somehow to elude her grasp in this moment of poignant emotion. Her cousin Gilbert was dead—up to that point everything was frightfully clear, beyond it all was dark.

‘I suppose there is no doubt,’ she began, after a pause, during which Mr. Dunnet had waited in respectful and somewhat anxious silence for the result of his second announcement. This time he was certain that he had been too abrupt, and he had meant to break the news so gently. It was her fierce questioning which had thrown him off his balance. Deeply impressed as he was by the magnitude of the announcement he had to make, Mr. Dunnet had come here in some trepidation. He had more than once read of cases in which men who had won the big prize in a lottery had either dropped down dead or gone raving mad from sheer excitement. And here he had a young woman to deal with—a material with which he had never been very familiar—and no lottery-prize could be more unexpected than this accession of fortune.

Ulrica’s first words, spoken in a tone which sounded quite sane, were an immense relief to the lawyer’s mind.

‘No doubt whatever, Countess. The case is quite clear, though the contingency is certainly unforeseen. There is no one else whose claim—’

‘But it is not that I am speaking of, I mean about his death; it was in the fire, of course? Did they—’ a shudder passed over her—‘did they find his body?’

Mr. Dunnet shook his head.

‘Despite the most careful searches, no trace has been found. Unfortunately, however, the inquiries which I personally conducted leave no margin for any doubt. If you will lend me your attention for a few minutes longer, I shall convince you that no trouble has been spared to get at the truth.’

He drew the black leather bag towards him, and unlocking it, took out various large, official-looking sheets of paper. Having stated the circumstances to her at some length, he laid these sheets before her one after the other,

accompanying each with a few words of explanation. They were the written declarations, made under oath, of the various witnesses who had been called upon for their evidence—that of the head-waiter of the hotel *Commissionnaire*, of the driver, the ticket-seller, and the box-keeper. Taken together they formed a chain of proof which led to one inevitable conclusion. Ulrica took the sheets one by one, as they were handed to her, read them through from beginning to end, and laid them down again without a word. She was wondering to herself why Mr. Dunnet should take so much trouble to convince her of a fact of which she felt already so hopelessly convinced. She knew now that in her innermost soul she had despaired ever since the day when the news of the fire had reached the village. Then Mr. Dunnet, having gathered the larger sheets together and returned them to his bag, produced a smaller, stiffer sheet, which he likewise laid before Ulrica.

‘What is that?’ she asked listlessly.

‘It is the certificate of death of Sir Ernest Nevyll, who was in possession of the title—though he was unaware of the fact—for exactly one week. By his death the title becomes extinct, and the fortune passes into your possession.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ said Ulrica indifferently, ‘I don’t want the money; there must be somebody else to take it.’

‘Allow me to state the case; it is perfectly simple. I am afraid I must trouble you with a little genealogy. Eighty years ago Sir Francis Nevyll was the head of the family; he had two children, a son and a daughter; the son’—here Mr. Dunnet referred to a note-book in his hand—‘succeeded him in 1828 as Sir Arthur Nevyll; this Sir Arthur had two sons, of whom the eldest, Sir Gilbert, came to the title in 1865. It is he who has perished in this truly frightful affair. His younger brother, George, died in 1876 of consumption, leaving one son, the same Sir Ernest the certificate of whose death is lying before you at this moment. Sir Gilbert was childless, and Sir Ernest was unmarried. I hope you follow me?’

Ulrica gave a faint sign of assent, and Mr. Dunnet continued speaking:

‘These two deaths, following so rapidly upon one another, led to a contingency entirely unforeseen. Sir Ernest had always been considered as Sir Gilbert’s heir, and since he was betrothed and within a few weeks of his wedding, nothing seemed more unlikely than an abrupt extinction of the family. It was only when, having concluded the inquiries in Vienna, I returned to England and investigated the matter, that the actual state of things became clear to me. You must know that at the time of Sir Gilbert’s marriage all his real property was settled, in the first place, on his possible children, failing these, on his brother George and his children, and failing all these, on the Eldringen family—that is, the descendants of Eleonore Nevyll. I have told you that the Sir Francis whom I have mentioned had a daughter as well as a son; this daughter, Eleonore Nevyll, was married in 1825 to Count Heinrich Eldringen. Of this marriage there were two children, the eldest being your father, Count Emil Eldringen, of whom you are the only child. By the terms of the settlement you are therefore undoubtedly the rightful claimant of the bulk of the landed estates; but this is not all. Four years after his marriage, Sir Gilbert made a will by which he left all his property, real and personal, not under settlement—a few inconsiderable legacies excepted—to the inheritor of the settled property, which at that time he never doubted would be his nephew Ernest.’

Mr. Dunnet paused with the point of his pencil on his note-book. Surely it was time for the new-made heiress to show some further sign of life.

‘Go on,’ said Ulrica, not because she was listening to what he said, but because under cover of his even, monotonous speech she could more conveniently follow her own thoughts, which were dragging her along in one irresistible channel.

Mr. Dunnet appeared somewhat discomfited.

‘Well, to tell the truth, Countess, there does not remain much that I can go on to. I fancied I had explained the case sufficiently. I hope you will not resent the delay which has occurred; but it took me some considerable time and trouble to work out the matter, as well as to trace

you to your present abode.' He coughed a short, dry cough, and cast a disapproving glance round the room. 'It was finally from your aunt, Countess Minart, that I obtained the clue to your address. In order to avoid all possible mistake as to identity, the authorities of S——' (he named a neighbouring town on the plain), 'to whom I applied, allowed this gentleman to accompany me.' Mr. Dunnet, by a motion of his hand, indicated the notary, who all this time had been modestly hovering in the background. 'I think I have said all that need be said to-day; it remains for me only to receive your orders with regard to your journey to England, which, as I presume, will take place immediately. Your being on the spot to take personal possession of the estates will simplify many matters of detail.'

The lawyer, as he spoke, was not in the least aware of the tinge of servility in his tone. If a hundred family lawyers had been put up in a row, this particular family lawyer might have been picked out as a pearl among his kind; but eighty thousand a year is eighty thousand a year, and human nature is human nature, and Mr. Dunnet, honest servant though he was, would need to have been something more or less than a man if unconsciously he had not bent his back a very little before the person whom he himself had come to invest with that awful power which money can give. He had served Sir Gilbert faithfully and long, and he mourned him sincerely; but Sir Gilbert had passed away, his star had gone down forever, while the star of this girl before him was only just rising, to shine, in all human probability, for years and years after even the memory of the unfortunate baronet and his tragical fate should be forgotten.

'I don't want to go to England,' said Ulrica, awaking as though from a dream, 'I don't want to take the money, —why, it was *his* money, don't you understand? I could never bear to let him give me even a penny; it would kill me. I will never take it, do you hear? I want to stay where I am.'

'One moment, if you please.' Mr. Dunnet spoke now in the tolerant tone of a reasonable human being who is

attempting to argue with an unreasonable one. He had never, it is true, heard of any case in which the sudden unhinging of intellect produced by an overwhelming accession of fortune had taken the shape of the fortune being refused, yet he could scarcely doubt that this was the case here. 'One moment, if you please. There is no question of anything being *given* to you, the money is nobody's but your own. You can refuse to spend it, of course. And naturally you are free not to set up your residence in England, should you prefer this country—no one has any right to interfere with your personal wishes—but even your personal wishes cannot alter the fact that the whole of the Nevill estates and fortune are now in your undisputed possession.'

Ulrica put her hand to her forehead. 'Estates,' 'fortune,' 'residence,' what connection could there be between them and her? In this same helpless bewilderment she listened to his further explanations and arguments, which finally merged into respectful entreaties. Would she not reconsider her resolution and consent to visit England? He himself would scarcely know how to undertake the responsibility of managing so vast a fortune without her authority to back him up. 'I will have nothing to do with it,' was the only answer Ulrica made; 'I want to stay where I am.'

'There is nothing to prevent your staying where you are!' cried Mr. Dunnet in despair, his eloquence being exhausted; 'but surely you must understand that I cannot go back to England with that for your only answer.'

'I want to be left in peace. Oh, go away, leave me alone!' she cried, with a burst of irrepressible impatience; 'I am so tired, so tired, after all these months!'

It was then that Mr. Dunnet turned resignedly to his inexhaustible black bag and drew out of its depths yet another sheet of paper which, as he minutely explained, was an authorisation to act in her name, and which, after a further passage of arms, and by holding out the prospect of his immediate departure as a bribe, he induced her to sign.

'And have you absolutely no orders to give me?' inquired the lawyer submissively.

‘None, except that I want to be left in peace.’

Mr. Dunnet took up his black bag, cast one more glance round the room, as though he were calling on the tables and chairs to be witness of this unheard-of thing, then, having looked again into Ulrica’s face and seen no signs of relenting, he moved dejectedly towards the door. ‘I suppose I had better go before she turns me out,’ was the thought in his mind.

A few minutes later he was walking down the lane towards the road, with the notary hopping by his side and the black bag in his hand. He did not feel quite certain whether he was walking on his head or on his heels. This afternoon, while he approached Glockenau, he had attempted to beguile the monotony of the journey by sketching out in his mind the various shapes which the interview might be expected to take. The new heiress might be vulgar, she might be stupid, she might be a virago—he thought he had been prepared for anything, but no,—he had certainly not been prepared for this.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW PASSION.

THERE was no sleep for Ulrica that night. Until daylight came she paced the floor, or sat for hours with her hands clasped in her lap, staring before her with wide, vacant eyes. One sentence rang forever in her ears, the words which Nandl’s mother had quavered out in her foolish fear: ‘O God, what a terrible way to die!’

It was true, then. It was no longer possible or probable, it was *true*. Though she should live for fifty years more she could never hear his voice again, though she should travel to the uttermost ends of the earth she could not find him,—he was gone, the world was empty of him for evermore.

What was it—in the name of Heaven, what was it that

had ailed her before to-day? What had she had to complain of before the final sealing of his fate? Had she not been treading the same earth that he had trodden, and had not one sun shone upon them both? She had had all that, and she had dared to be not content? And here the horror did not end with death alone. Not only had he no longer any place in the world, but even those six feet of earth which the poorest has a right to claim had been denied him. As though stung by the lash of an invisible whip, Ulrica started up and recommenced her restless pacing of the floor. She thought of people who could go to pray daily on the graves of those they had loved, who could deck the cold mounds with flowers, and press their lips against the stone, and in this moment it seemed to her that those people were not to be pitied, but to be envied. But as for her, though she should ransack the whole Marienhof garden to bind a funeral wreath, where should she hang it when bound? She might as well tear it petal from petal and strew it to the four winds of heaven.

If she could have wept, the relief would have been unspeakable, but her grief was not simple enough to let her weep so easily. So carefully had her heart been hardened against this man, that not even the storm of agony which had swept over her had sufficed to break her stubborn pride. She had loved him, she loved him still—she had given up all attempt to deny that it was so; but she still told herself, with a sort of desperate defiance, that she had loved an unworthy man. That he had perished so tragically could not diminish his guilt, though it might wring her heart with pity. All night long did this poignant pity struggle with the bitterness that was so deeply ingrained. He had been treacherous and false, yes—but ‘O God!’—and again she would crouch down shuddering—‘what a terrible way to die!’

It was almost morning when her tears came at last, and she fell into exhausted slumber.

As for the second piece of news which Mr. Dunnet had brought her, the one which he considered to be the chief announcement, she had not so much as taken it into consideration. It was not exactly that she disbelieved what

he had told her, she had even in a sort of mechanical way followed his explanations, but the whole idea seemed to her distant and unreal. Moreover, there was something unnatural and startling in the thought that she should inherit her cousin Gilbert's fortune; if she thought of the thing at all, it was to turn with an instinctive repulsion from the idea of taking *his* money.

When she awoke after that exhausted sleep, she dragged herself up and went about her work exactly as usual, sweeping the floor, lighting the fire, and peeling the potatoes, just as though she were exactly the same person she had been yesterday. Work was her one bulwark against despair, and the reflection that there was no more need for her to work never once came near her.

At the end of about a week there came a letter from Mr. Dunnet. It was dated from London, and contained a respectful inquiry as to whether he had her authority for continuing the drainage of the sea-marsh on the Morton Hall estate, which had been commenced under Sir Gilbert's father, and which was yearly adding considerably to the value of the estate. There were four pages of explanations concerning sea-banks, and canals, and central drains, which was all Greek to Ulrica. She tossed the letter aside and did not so much as answer it, and yet Mr. Dunnet's epistle had not been without its effect. If it did nothing else, it brought the reality of the tremendous change in her position within her comprehension. The first mists of bewilderment were beginning slowly to clear away, and though her determination never wavered for a moment, yet her reason at least had been forced to recognise the existing state of things.

In a very short time a second letter came, a great bulky letter this time, enclosing various papers which she was requested to sign. It was something in connection with rents that were being collected—this much Ulrica was able to understand; and as a concession to the urgent tone of Mr. Dunnet's note, and in order to guard against any more pressing entreaties, Ulrica somewhat ungraciously did as she was asked.

Again some weeks passed, when one day early in March

another envelope addressed in the stiff handwriting she had got to know was put into her hands. Ulrica opened it with a sense of annoyance—was the man never going to stop badgering her about this sea-marsh and these farms?

There was nothing about the marsh or the farms, however, in the letter this time; there was indeed another paper to sign, but the word rent did not occur in it. 'Since Lady Nevyll has expressed the wish to have her jointure paid quarterly,' wrote Mr. Dunnet, 'I presume you have no objection to the arrangement, and I should be much obliged by your signing and returning the enclosed document—which bears on the matter—at your earliest convenience.'

Ulrica laid down the letter, and with her forehead in her hands plunged into a new train of thought. Never once, during all these months, had she troubled herself about Lady Nevyll. So painfully full had her thoughts been, that she had all but forgotten the existence of the woman who, after all, in one sense was her rival, the mention of whose name had been sufficient to dispel her short-lived dream of joy. Gilbert's widow—some one who had a better right than she had to weep for him, who could mourn for him openly in the face of the world—how was it that she had never thought of Gilbert's widow before? The woman whom he had loved, though only passingly—the woman who had been his wife—Ulrica rose from her place and stepped to the open door. The March air was chill, yet not one whit too chill for her throbbing forehead. A new passion, born in one instant, had clutched her heart with a grip of iron. She could not have named this newborn passion, but it was jealousy, a fierce and burning jealousy. Together with it, as an inevitable result, curiosity awoke. What was she like, this creature who had usurped her place, who had cheated her of her happiness? Tall or short? Had she been beautiful and was she beautiful still? more beautiful than Ulrica herself? Were her eyes brighter than Ulrica's eyes? her skin clearer than Ulrica's skin? By what means had she succeeded in blinding Gilbert to her worthlessness? Ulrica felt that there could be no peace for her until she knew. She had moved from

the door by this time, and stood before the little mirror on the wall. A triumphant smile rose to her lips as she caught the image there. More beautiful than she was herself? It was not likely. Though the mirror—not being a mirror in a fairy-tale—had not the gift of speech, yet its answer was almost as plain as though spoken in words. What a triumph to place herself beside her rival and to let the world judge between the two; what a satisfaction to convince herself that Gilbert could never have felt for that other woman anything approaching to the passion he had conceived for her! How was it to be done? She knit her brows in perplexed thought, then after a minute she began to laugh. Why, she had only to do that which she had been pressed to do, what Mr. Dunnet, no doubt, thought her inexplicably eccentric for not doing; she had only to go to England and see for herself. She presumed that Mr. Dunnet would send her money for the journey if she wrote for it. No doubt he would triumph at her capitulation—well, no matter, his triumph would be short. One single hour spent in Charlotte Nevyl's society would probably tell her all that she wanted to know. But she could not go to England for one single hour or even for one single day; this much, despite her sudden agitation, she distinctly recognised. In order to mask her real motive a little time must be added. What if she were to write and announce herself on a visit of a few weeks? Nothing could sound more plausible. Then, her object once gained, this jealous curiosity stilled and her doubts at rest, she would turn her back on England and return to bury herself forever in her beloved Glockenau.

The resolution once taken, Ulrica's impatience to carry it into execution grew with every hour. That same day she wrote for the money, and carefully calculated how many days must necessarily elapse before she could receive it. It seemed to her that Mr. Dunnet was unpardonably slow, and yet, in point of fact, the money came as fast as the post would let it. The family lawyer was a great deal too thankful for the turn affairs were taking voluntarily to delay the arrival of the heiress even by one single day.

The money-letter found Ulrica all ready to start; she

had employed the days of waiting in making all the preparations necessary for her journey. The first of these preparations had been to take out of her box the black dress she had worn at her father's funeral, and carefully to iron it out, also to freshen up the trimming on the one hat she possessed. It was, of course, evident that she could not travel to England in peasant costume, and yet it was with a distinct pang of regret that she unknotted the silk handkerchief in order to try on the hat. Though the era marked by that handkerchief had been the one in which she had suffered most, yet it had likewise been the only one in which she had known perfect happiness. To return to ordinary civilised garments, even only for a time, was like saying good-bye to a very precious bit of her life.

The landlady had consented to take charge of the Marienhof during Ulrica's absence, and to her Ulrica handed over the keys on the evening of her departure.

'I have inherited some money,' was the explanation she gave, 'and I am going to England for a few weeks to see after it.'

'Wouldn't it be wiser to put away the plates in a cupboard,' the landlady suggested, 'instead of leaving them to get covered with cobwebs on the shelf?' For, with the exception of the one small trunk she took with her, everything in the *Stube* had been left untouched.

'There won't be time for many cobwebs to be spun across them,' Ulrica replied; 'I have told you that I shall be back in less than three weeks.'

'Yes, yes, so you say now, but you have yet to see what you feel like in England. I don't know where England is, though I *have* heard of there being such a country, but I *do* know what it means to inherit money, and I've seen the difference it makes in people. Didn't the widow Bachmeier's brother make her every sort of promise when his uncle in town made him his heir? And the end was that he just went away and left her to starve. Holy Barbara! You don't expect me to believe, do you, that you'll go on scrubbing floors and cooking your own dinner if you've got money enough to pay some one else to do it for you? So, about these plates, if you don't come back—'

'I shall certainly come back,' said Ulrica indignantly; 'I should never dream of living in England. The plates can perfectly well remain where they are.'

The landlady made no further remark, but shrugged her shoulders and retreated to her kitchen.

It was not till the day of departure came that Ulrica became fully aware of how fast her heart had grown to the little mountain village. How would her patients get on without her? she asked herself anxiously, as she made a final round and doled out the extra doses of medicine that were to last till her return. The round of sick-calls concluded, her steps turned instinctively towards the churchyard. She wanted to look again at her father's grave and at that of Pater Sepp. It was while she was standing between the two that she all at once became aware of the tears that dimmed her eyes. She dashed them away impatiently.

'I wonder what I am crying for,' she said, with a smile. 'I am not saying good-bye to the place. Why should I not be standing on the same spot again this day month? There is nothing to prevent me.'

Yet, for all her reasoning, the last moment was a hard one.

'I shall be back, I shall be back very soon,' she kept repeating to herself, when already the *Stellwagen* was in motion and the figure of the landlady waving her a farewell from the door of the 'Golden Sun' had begun to grow indistinct. She looked up at the windows of her own Marienhof as she passed under them, and for one moment her resolution almost tottered, but it was too late to retreat. In her pocket lay Mr. Dunnet's letter, full of a respectful yet exultant greeting to the new mistress of Morton Hall. All preparations should be made for her reception, he assured her; all that he begged for was a telegram from Calais to announce the time of her arrival. The step was irretrievably taken. One more long glance at the jumble of rustic roofs, scarcely freed yet from their latest burden of snow, at the orchards, lifeless still indeed, yet ready to burst into blossom at the first touch of sunshine, at the black, unchangeable pine trees, sternly un-

moved by the approach of spring—and in the next minute the *Stellwagen* had jolted around a bend in the road, and Glockenau was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PLAYMATES.

MOST of us know how, when things begin to 'happen,' they have a way of happening in so rapid a succession that one event seems to tread on the heels of the last. After flowing on for years in unbroken monotony, the stream of life reaches a point where its progress becomes a series of wild leaps down precipitous ledges, hurling us, breathless and bewildered, from one unknown depth into another.

This was Charlotte Nevyll's experience. Her marriage had been the last landmark in her life. Of a sudden, however, the stagnation which bore the false appearance of calm was convulsed to its very depth. It had not been the news of the Vienna catastrophe which had given the first check; the change had begun before then. Charlotte had come home on what was to be a flying visit of a month or so—a sort of stepping-stone between Valerie Bad and Florence, where she had a vague idea of wintering—and on a certain dark October afternoon had set out to pay one of a round of calls which bore the mingled stamp of 'newly returned' and 'farewell' appearance.

It was past six when the brougham returned from Collingwood, yet Lady Nevyll, who, on leaving home, had settled herself so languidly in her corner, now sat upright and wide awake, while a faint tinge of colour glowed in her cheeks. For the first time for many years she sprang out of the carriage without assistance, and having, on reaching her room, dismissed her wondering maid, she sat down, still cloaked and bonneted, on the nearest chair, and pressed her trembling fingers against her temples.

On this afternoon she had met again, after nineteen years, the man whose love she had renounced for the sake of her ambition.

During all these years, except for some stray months of leave, Basil Rockingham had been absent from England, moving from one embassy to another. It was only lately that, having resigned his appointment, he had returned home in order to superintend the efforts and keep warm the ardor of some influential friends, who were paving the way for him towards the yet higher post which for long had been the object of his ambition.

There had been a good many people in the Collingwood drawing-room when Charlotte entered, and the lights had not yet been brought. Various hands had been put out and various names had been murmured. At the sound of one of the names, Charlotte had started and peered keenly at the person before her. Had she heard aright? Could it be? Rockingham was not a very usual name. She was still saying this to herself when the lamp was carried in along with the tea, and Charlotte discovered that she was standing face to face with her lover of olden days.

'Basil!' The word had escaped from her lips before she was aware of it, even as the blood rushed to her face. It was by good luck alone that the rest of the company had gravitated to the tea-table, and that the much-interested hostess was the only witness of this small interlude.

Mr. Rockingham took her outstretched hand somewhat doubtfully. Twenty years alter a woman more than they do a man, and Mr. Rockingham, besides, was not the sort of man who ever alters much.

'Old acquaintances, I see,' remarked Mrs. Byrd, with a kindly if somewhat vacant smile. 'You had better sit down here, you must have lots to say to each other. I'll get you a cup of tea in the meantime.'

'We have been playmates in our day,' said Mr. Rockingham, with a perfectly unembarrassed smile. He was sure of his ground now, her eyes had given him the clue he required.

And then they had sat down side by side, and despite the strangers all round, it had seemed to Charlotte that they two

were alone in the room. Just nineteen years ago they had sat together in just such a dark October afternoon, but it had been on a bank of withered grass and with a carpet of dead leaves at their feet; the half-stripped beech trees had stood sentinel all round, and instead of this gay chatter there had been the cawing of rooks overhead. Was he, too, thinking of that day? Did that word 'good-bye' still ring in his ears as it was ringing in hers?

Yes, they had been playmates, these two, Basil and Charlotte, long before they had been lovers. The small south English parsonage of which her father had been rector was divided by scarcely a mile of green fields from the plain brick house in which Doctor Rockingham, after years of blistering and plastering, had set himself down to enjoy his well-earned rest, among the choicest plum and peach trees—for in laying aside the lancet, the doctor had taken up the pruning knife. The doctor's only son was several years older than the rector's youngest daughter; it was therefore not so much a similarity in their age as a similarity in their tastes which drew them together. It was always for Charlotte that Basil used to gather the finest peaches on the garden walls; always for Charlotte that he used to carve boats to sail on the parsonage pond. He carved the boats so neatly and with so steady a hand that his fingers never showed any of those unsightly gashes with which the average schoolboy's hand is generally decorated, and she sailed them so circumspectly that her mother could not remember ever having had to scold her for wet clothes. And where, too, should a fresh frock have come from, supposing this one to have been drenched? The little Chattie knew very well that there was no great store in the press, and the idea of having to go to church on Sunday in a frock which had obviously been ironed once too often was one which weighed heavily on her mind. To conclude from this that Charlotte's dominant fault was vanity would be a great mistake. If she threw envious glances at the costume worn by the little girl of her own age whose golden curls lighted up the gloom of the carved family pew which belonged to Norby Castle, the great house of the neighbourhood, it was not for the sake

of the fine clothes themselves, but rather because of the magic reflection of 'High Life' which they bore. The clothes were only a small part of the whole; there were many other things more dazzling still—the carriage at the church door with the emblazoned panels, the liveried servants, the tenants who stood with bared heads while Lord Norby came down the churchyard path with Lady Norby on his arm. It all opened to her visions of another world. Next time that her father took her out to drive, the shabby old pony-carriage would appear to her ten times more shabby than usual.

The discontent fermenting within this small soul was kept tightly locked up. Her sisters would never have understood; their narrow horizon contented them entirely. The only person to whom she ever opened her heart was Basil. Basil, somehow, not only understood but obviously sympathised with her sentiments. Also he could give her information about that great world after whose brilliancy she secretly sighed, for Basil was being educated at Harrow. Most people had thrown up their hands when Doctor Rockingham sent his son to Harrow, and talked of the desire to cut a dash; but in point of fact it was not the doctor who had sent his son to Harrow, it was the son who had sent himself. From the time of his babyhood the father's will had never had a chance against that of the son. When still in the nursery he had always chosen his own toys and settled the direction of his walks for himself; when, therefore, he decreed that Harrow was the only place at which he could be properly educated, there was nothing to do but to submit.

It was during the Easter holidays after his first term at Harrow that Basil delighted Charlotte by the descriptions of all that he had seen and heard and guessed at within the last three months, for the most valuable information he had picked up in this short space was by no means that which he had learnt from books. The estimate of life which he had formed for himself at fourteen proved to have been so correct that he saw no reason for materially altering it at thirty.

'If you want to play a part in the world,' he explained

to the attentive Charlotte, 'there are two things you've got to have: money and *push*. I've got the push, and I shall manage to get the money for myself.'

It was in the beech-grove adjoining the rectory ground that these views were being discussed. Here the ground swelled up and down between the trees in irregular ridges, making it the very place to sit in because of the perfect choice of green banks. In one corner of the beech-grove there was a rookery, and at this season there were many soft sounds to be heard up there in the branches, subdued rustlings and chirpings and the discreet flapping of maternal wings.

'But how will you manage to get the money?' Charlotte asked.

'Somehow,' answered Basil, with magnificent vagueness. 'There are lots of ways in which a fellow who has got "push" can manage that. I've only got to marry a girl who has got lots of her own, for instance.'

'To be sure,' agreed Charlotte, thoughtfully.

'And what *you've* got to do,' added Basil, as an after-thought, 'is to marry a fellow who has got lots of his own.'

'But then, Basil, we can never marry each other,' with a vague pang at her nine-year-old heart.

'Marry each other? I should think not.' He smiled a superior smile. 'You'll have to marry the richest man you meet. You'll have your chances, too. Do you know that you're going to turn out jolly pretty one of these days?'

'Am I really?' she said, colouring with pleasure; and it was from that day forward that she began to take an interest in her own looks. In Charlotte's looks, quite as much as in the similarity of their tastes, might have been found the explanation of Basil's preference for her society; for, despite his keen eye for the practical aspect of life, he was anything but blind to its more ornamental side, and it amused him a great deal better to talk to the pretty Charlotte than to her four plain sisters. They were wonderfully like each other, these sisters, the pretty one included; all fair, all slender, all blue-eyed, and yet, with the exception of Charlotte, all absolutely insignificant. It was almost as though Nature, having determined to work after a

certain fixed pattern, had blundered over the first attempts, feeling her way, as it were, towards perfection, until, after four distinct failures, she had at length, at the fifth attempt, achieved a success. In Edith, for instance, the slenderness had been decidedly overdone, while Clementina's hair had turned out sandy and Maria's eyes had been designed a trifle too round. It was in Charlotte, and only in Charlotte, that the right mixture of elements had at length been hit upon and the idea brought to perfection.

And thus the years passed. Basil and Charlotte met only during the holidays, but were then almost inseparable. The elder Miss Dicksons instinctively avoided the beech-grove, and the rector and the doctor winked knowingly at each other. Neither of the parents doubted for a moment that this was going to be a match.

When it became known that Basil inclined towards diplomacy, people again threw up their hands. Diplomacy, of all things in the world! The son of a simple country doctor! As if everybody did not know that the first indispensable requirements for success in a diplomatic career were money and high connections. 'And who says that I shall not yet attain both?' Basil would suavely reply. Meanwhile he was studying law at Cambridge, whither he had decreed that he should go on leaving Harrow. This resolution of his son's had made it necessary for the old doctor to tear himself away from his beloved peach trees and to resume his medical practice, for by this time the whole of the hardly earned savings had melted away. It was a well-invested capital, as Basil assured his father, and would bring in fruit a hundredfold. Of course it was hard upon the governor to have to put his shoulder to the wheel again, and it cost Basil a distinct and perfectly genuine stab in the heart to have to accept the sacrifice, yet the idea of *not* accepting it never even occurred to him.

At last there came a day when Basil, on his return home, found that his little playmate had suddenly turned into a young lady. It was on a bright August afternoon that the meeting took place. Basil had never doubted that Charlotte was going to turn out well, but it was not until he saw her advancing towards him in her white dress,

along the sunlit garden-path, that he realised how even more than 'jolly pretty' she had become. She was one of those women who step from childhood to womanhood almost without any intermediate period—a bud that bursts into flower overnight. Her form had rounded, her eyes had deepened, her every movement was softened by a new-born grace. When last he had seen her she had been a lanky, awkward child: six months had done it all. It was not so much her beauty in itself, as the surprise at the transformation, which was now working on Basil. The consciousness of it rushed upon him unawares, putting his usually so well-regulated circulation almost out of order for a minute or so.

On Charlotte's side, too, there was a quite new shyness, which added to the intoxication that was stealing over his senses. It was difficult to say how it happened exactly, whether it was the surprise which had done the mischief, or whether the magic of the slanting sunbeams and the drowsy murmuring of the bees among the flowers had anything to do with it; but all at once the charms of his future career seemed to grow strangely indistinct to Basil's mind, and when presently the doctor and the rector disappeared into the house under some ridiculously transparent pretext, and when, turning to the nymph beside him, he discovered that she was trembling under his gaze—no, it was not possible to say how it had come about exactly, but in another minute their eyes had met, then, without a word being said, their hands sought each other's, and then—still without any word being necessary—his lips had touched hers, and in one long lingering kiss their doom was sealed. Now that it was done, it seemed so ridiculous ever to have supposed that it could have come to anything but this.

There followed a rapturous evening; soft whisperings in the rose-clad arbour, delicious wanderings along the garden paths, and finally supper in the same rose-clad arbour, enlivened by the almost boisterous spirits—not of the newly engaged couple, for Basil could not have been boisterous to save his life—but of the two delighted parents.

To Charlotte it seemed all like a piece out of somebody

else's life. The same feeling of unreality was upon her still as she walked home through the clover-scented fields with Basil by her side. It was not until the wicket-gate had fallen to behind her departing lover, that a faint feeling of uneasiness began to steal over her. By the time she reached the solitude of her own bedroom she was already half sobered.

When her sister Maria, with whom she shared the room, entered, Charlotte was sitting plunged in her reflections. Maria came up and embraced her effusively. She was likewise engaged to be married, and was only waiting until her very worthy young curate should have scraped together pennies enough to start the housekeeping.

'I've been thinking that we might be married on the same day,' said Maria, presently, as she brushed out her hair. 'Don't you think it's a good idea, Chatty?'

'I—I don't know,' said Chatty, without any enthusiasm.

'It would certainly be more convenient,' pursued the irrepressible Maria. 'It would save the expense of one whole wedding-breakfast; the same wedding-cake might almost do for us both; and,' added Maria, with a light-hearted laugh, 'they might throw the same slippers after us.'

Chatty made no reply; there was a slight sinking at her heart. Was this what she had come to?

It was in a state of mind which can best be described as something half-way between a glow and a chill that Charlotte fell asleep that night.

When she met Basil next day, it almost seemed as though he, too, in the meantime, had been making his reflections. At any rate, this second meeting was a very much quieter affair than the first. The two lovers glanced furtively into each other's faces, as though in the hope of surprising each other's thoughts unawares. Charlotte appeared absent-minded, and Basil was strangely thoughtful.

Several weeks passed in this way; the sense of mutual embarrassment was daily growing. As though by common consent all talk of plans was avoided. More and more did a tone of regret steal into their talk, regret for that which each had sacrificed for the other's sake. Clearly

and ever more clearly did Charlotte feel that even Basil's kiss was poisoned to her by the recollection of the price which it had cost.

It was in October that the strain at length gave way. There had been a fancy bazaar at the Deanery, to which the whole neighbourhood was invited, the rector's daughters included. Charlotte could not help noticing that when she and her sister drove up in the little pony-carriage with the mended harness, Basil, who was waiting in the entrance, received them with a clouded brow.

'Couldn't you have managed to put on something rather less crumpled?' he whispered, in a vexed tone, as he assisted her to alight; 'nobody wears those long hanging things now.'

'I have got nothing else,' whispered back Charlotte, feeling ready to cry. Her dress had not looked so *very* much out of date at home, but having cast one glance at the crisp toilettes all round, she would have liked best to sink straight into the ground. There, just opposite to her, stood Lady Harriet Norby, now a grown-up young woman like herself, looking so comfortable and exactly in place in her costume of dark crimson cloth. How the men were pressing round her! And yet, despite her golden curls, she was not half so pretty as Charlotte. It was only that she had the right surroundings, while Charlotte had the wrong ones; it was only that she was somebody, while Charlotte was nobody.

When the moment for parting came, Basil whispered to Charlotte: 'Will you come to the old place in the beech-grove at four to-morrow?'

It was not quite four o'clock next day when she reached the beech-grove. In order to pass the time she began to pick up the black feathers that lay sprinkled over the ground, but her fingers were so cold with the thought of what was coming that she could scarcely hold them. Overhead the rooks were wheeling about insanely against the sky—a heaven full of black shooting stars.

Punctually at four o'clock Basil appeared. He was just a trifle pale, but perfectly composed. His kiss was a distinct shade warmer than it had lately been; and then they sat down on the bank, and he immediately went to the

point. He spoke kindly and sensibly. They had both made a great mistake, but which luckily was not yet irretrievable. They were fond of each other, of course, very fond of each other, but it was ridiculous to suppose that—considering what their aspirations had always been—either of them could find lasting happiness in the sort of existence they would have to lead when married. . . . ‘I know that *I* could not,’ added Basil, with characteristic frankness.

There were lots of masks behind which he might have attempted to conceal the real state of the case. He might have talked of self-sacrifice and have pointed out the unpardonable selfishness of chaining so bright a creature to so precarious a lot, etc., but whatever faults Basil might have, hypocrisy was not one of them.

‘Of course,’ he concluded, ‘the decision rests with you. If you prefer to face all the risks of the uncertain future, I shall naturally redeem my word.’

Charlotte said nothing; by this time she was crying in a hopeless, helpless sort of fashion, which was a much more distinct answer than words could have been.

‘Of course it is very hard upon us both,’ reasoned Basil, ‘but in time, no doubt, we will live it down. To marry well is simply my duty to my career; I have no choice; and as for you, Chatty, to marry well is your one chance in life.’

‘I shall never care for any—any one but you,’ gasped Chatty.

‘I know it,’ responded Basil soothingly, ‘but you will marry the first really rich suitor who aspires to your hand.’

Again Charlotte allowed her tears to answer for her.

‘Come,’ said Basil, with a rather forced attempt at cheerfulness, for, to do him justice, the sight of Charlotte’s tears distressed him considerably; ‘we must keep our courage up to the mark, Chatty. Why, it was on this very spot that we agreed, years ago, that we were too poor to marry each other. I remember the day quite distinctly. We were much more sensible then than we have proved ourselves this summer.’

And after that it seemed that the moment had come for

saying good-bye. There was no use, as Basil very rationally observed, in prolonging the pain of parting. So, while the dead leaves rustled at their feet and the rooks still wheeled wildly overhead, he took her in his arms for the last time and kissed her trembling lips.

'God bless you, Chatty,' he said at the last, almost a little huskily. 'I hope you will be happy.'

The huskiness was perfectly genuine, for he was really suffering acutely; they were both suffering acutely. And yet neither of these young people would have had it otherwise, and each felt, as they turned their faces homewards, that, though it had been a wrench, yet it had also been the lifting of a weight.

Neither the doctor nor the rector was able to see the force of the reasons which made the union of Basil and Charlotte impossible. In fact, both the foolish old papas were bitterly disappointed; but, after all, this is a free country, and though lovers can occasionally be kept apart, they cannot be forced into each other's arms unless they wish.

Charlotte did not again see Basil after the day they parted in the beech-grove. After the trick his heart had played him on that sunshiny summer afternoon, he felt that he had serious reasons for mistrusting himself. He had looked out his train and packed his portmanteau before he even turned his steps towards the place of rendezvous.

Within the next few years both Basil and Charlotte made brilliant marriages. Basil, very shortly after his departure from home, astonished the world by becoming engaged to a certain Lady Emmelina Valbert, an heiress with miles of property in Scotland and a slight cast in her left eye. By the time the marriage took place he was already appointed *attaché* to the British embassy at Athens (the Minister there being a second cousin of his wife's), and had thus definitely entered on his diplomatic career.

In the course of the same year Charlotte received a quite unexpected invitation to spend a week in London with a distant relation of her mother's. It was during that visit that she met Gilbert Nevyl.

By no possible means could her dreams of greatness have been more brilliantly fulfilled—nay, they were more

than fulfilled, they were surpassed—and yet Charlotte's life was a failure. Half-hearted in everything that she ever attempted to do, she had been half-hearted as well in the one great step of her life. In every way her nature was unfortunately mixed. She had been mean enough to degrade herself, yet she was right-minded enough to be ashamed of that self-elected degradation. Having committed the greatest treachery which a woman can commit, the want of a certain 'grit' (to have recourse to a singularly expressive slang phrase) about the texture of her mind had debarred her from enjoying its fruits. Like Judas she had sold her master, and then in disgust at the price of her crime she had gone and flung down the silver pieces in the temple.

During all these years she had known that she still loved Basil, partly because of the aversion she felt for her husband; but her love, like everything else about her, had sunk to a condition of lethargy. It was the sharp pain of the meeting in Mrs. Byrd's drawing-room which roused it once more to a new and active existence. The chronic heart-ache which she dragged about with her through life had become in one moment unbearably acute.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LION HUNTER.

'My dear, I can assure you that he was quite pensive all evening—positively pensive. Oh, you needn't look incredulous; I could see in one instant that you were not mere ordinary acquaintances.'

The speaker was little Mrs. Byrd, and only two days had elapsed since Charlotte's call at Collingwood. Mrs. Byrd had her own reasons for returning that call with such abnormal promptitude.

It must be explained that this lady was generally known in the neighbourhood as the 'lion hunter,' not because of

anything ferocious or bloodthirsty about her disposition, quite the reverse; but because her chief occupation in life consisted in hunting down everything in the shape of a celebrity which ever strayed within the circle of her ken, and then, by all the arts at her command, luring her victims on longer or shorter visits to Collingwood. Not that Mrs. Byrd particularly cared for celebrities in themselves; but she had discovered that other people did, and used them as a means towards an end. Her one ambition in life was to have her house spoken of as 'a nice house to stay at.' But in order to get people to stay at your house gladly and of their own free will, some sort of an attraction must necessarily be offered. There are some houses which are visited because of their *cuisine* or their shooting; others, again, whose invitations are responded to with alacrity on account of the pleasant prospect of taking in one of your host's pretty daughters to dinner every evening, or possibly the black or the blue eyes of the hostess herself may be the magnet which draws. At Collingwood, however, there was nothing of all that. The Byrds were not well enough off either to keep a French cook or to indulge in anything higher than champagne at thirty shillings a dozen. Mrs. Byrd had no pretty daughters, while she herself had straw-coloured hair, bottle-green eyes, and a muddy skin, which one of her best friends had once characterised as 'the complexion of a duck's foot;' and yet she was determined that people should visit her house. How was it to be done? After various unsuccessful attempts she had at length hit upon the idea of collecting 'lions' under her hospitable roof, and once secured, turning them into decoys, wherewith to attract the visiting world of the neighbourhood. If the scale on which your stables are kept will not allow you to give your visitors a choice of mounts, it will at any rate be better than nothing to promise them the company of an Indian prince, even if only of a dispossessed one; and there are cases in which Italian tenors or banished Bourbon agitators may form a very acceptable substitute for even the most exquisite *entrées*.

Of course, taking the above enumeration of Mrs. Byrd's charms into consideration, it is only natural that the pursuit

of the coveted lions was a somewhat desperate task. But determination and a fixed purpose can conquer greater obstacles than even green eyes and a muddy complexion. In default of everything else the dauntless little woman assiduously cultivated the art of flattery—not a noble art, perhaps, but a marvellously remunerative one. Such perfection had she reached in this line, that even the crustiest and most suspicious old German philosopher would leave Collingwood under the impression, not only that she had read all his works, but also that German philosophy was the one thing in life upon which she doted. In the case of poets and composers her task was easier, for what composer would not be pleased by being earnestly consulted as to the exact rendering of his newest composition, and what poet could resist the delicate flattery that is implied in the sight of his own volumes of verse casually dispersed among Shakespeare's and Byron's upon the drawing-room table?

When celebrities were scarce she had to content herself with personages, and it was in this way that Mr. Rockingham had fallen into her hands. Mr. Rockingham, as Her Majesty's late Minister at M——, was undoubtedly a personage. What raised him in value, too, was that there happened to have lately been a somewhat lively exchange of telegrams between London and M——, and it suited Mrs. Byrd admirably to be able to mention in her notes of invitation that the newly returned Minister was enjoying her hospitality, 'the same Mr. Rockingham, you know, who has been so much spoken of in the papers in connection with the royal festivities at M——.'

Mrs. Byrd's eagle eye had immediately detected that there was or had once been 'something' between Lady Nevyl and this newly captured lion, and instantly she had perceived the advantage to be gained from the circumstance, for in this one field of action the little woman was quite a genius, while in every other she was almost a goose. The ex-Minister had been rather difficult to manage. He was going away next day, and was pressed to return for a Christmas gathering that was planned. He had hitherto been evasive; evidently the attractions of Collingwood were not quite up to the occasion. How lucky it would

be if in the neighbourhood of this old 'playmate' she had discovered an inducement which could lure him back under her roof.

'We were playmates, you know,' said Charlotte, in some agitation, repeating the same words that Basil had used the day before yesterday.

'And yet,' remarked Mrs. Byrd, with an attempt at a roguish twinkle, 'I might almost venture to stake my best bonnet that some of the play was earnest too—on *his* side, at any rate. Well, I mustn't betray confidences, but I can tell you that I had my hands full with the answering of questions the other evening.'

'He must have found me terribly changed,' said Charlotte dejectedly.

'He didn't say so, if he did. And as for that, my dear, you have only yourself to thank for it if people are continually taking you for older than you are. You might take ten years off your age by paying a little more attention to your dress. By-the-bye,' she added abruptly, 'you are not going to start for Florence till after Christmas, are you?'

'I was thinking of going in November.'

'You had far better put it off. I quite count upon you for my Christmas gathering. In fact, I don't know how I shall entertain Mr. Rockingham without your help. I want you to talk reminiscences with your old playmate.'

'Is he to be with you at Christmas?' asked Charlotte, with a catch in her breath.

'Yes; he left us yesterday, and between ourselves, my dear, I don't think I should have succeeded in wringing from him the promise to return if it had not been for the prospect of these reminiscences; so positively you must not play me false. We all know that there is nothing so delightful as talking over old times; and, after all, it is a quite harmless amusement, especially as he has got no wife to take foolish, jealous ideas into her head. I suppose you know that he has been a free man these ten years past?'

Yes, Charlotte knew that he was a free man; but what difference could that make, she asked herself, after Mrs. Byrd had left her, since she was not a free woman?

Had Basil really been so deeply moved by the meeting? Vain question! What good could come of it? And yet, how would it be if she put off her journey to Florence for a little longer, just till after Christmas?

It was in less than two months from that date that Charlotte knew that she was a widow.

There had been a period of bewildered uncertainty to be lived through. Those same reports that were being scanned by Ulrica with beating heart and blanched lips in the depth of the pine-wood valley, were daily studied at Morton Hall with an attention no less exhaustive, and with a mixture of emotions which it would be hard to analyse. In these first days horror dominated every other sensation, pure horror, physical and mental. It was only when this cloud of horror began to disperse that a thousand new possibilities unrolled themselves before Charlotte's eyes. By degrees only it began to be clear to her how much the expectant thrill with which she daily took the paper in hand had in common with that mixture of hope and fear which makes the escaped slave, flying for his freedom, glance back over his shoulder to see whether he is in safety yet. Or must he go back to his chains?

Through it all, no sensation which could be identified as pity ever came near her soul. She had hated her husband with too fanatical a hatred to be capable of any softening even towards his memory. When she thought of that last meeting at Valerie Bad, it was not with any feeling of regret for the bitterness in which they had parted; no, it was rather to rejoice that he had not died without hearing the truth from her lips. To feel that she held his fate in her hand, and coldly to push him from her, what a moment of wild triumph it had been. 'I am unhappy, wretched, disappointed,' she had called out to him in spirit; 'thou art the embodiment of all my failures, thou for the sake of whose riches I have perjured myself, the mother of whose children it has not been granted me to be; be thou also unhappy, wretched, disappointed! I will move no finger to save thee!'

It had been under the pressure of this desire to avenge her lost happiness that she had burst the bonds of reticence

and unveiled her own baseness before her husband's eyes. He must know all—all, for only in this way could she utterly crush his hope in the future.

Even after all uncertainty had ceased and Charlotte knew herself to be free, she did not immediately succeed in taking a steady look at the future. It had all been too sudden, and fitted in too strangely to the thoughts that had been in her mind. A hundred times a day she changed her mind as to whether she should go to Florence or not, but the New Year was well entered upon, and still she lingered at Morton Hall, waiting for—she knew not what! It required some impulse coming from outside herself to order her ideas for her and to help her to adopt a distinct attitude towards her new position.

This impulse had hitherto been wanting, but it was close at hand.

One snowy forenoon, Charlotte, sitting alone in her morning-room, was roused by the clang of the door-bell pealing through the silent house. She had not heard the wheels of the approaching carriage upon the soft, fresh carpet of snow, which smothered every sound. 'More cards,' she thought indifferently. In the next minute a footman entered with a card upon a salver. She glanced at the name, then suddenly snatched up the cardboard.

'Is he gone?'

'No, my lady. The gentleman is waiting downstairs. He wished to know whether you would see him.'

'Show him up,' said Charlotte, rising from her chair and beginning with unsteady fingers to shake out the folds of her black dress and to smooth the hair under her cap.

CHAPTER XXVI.

REMINISCENCES.

SHE was still standing thus when the ex-Minister was ushered in.

It was a long, narrow room, and Charlotte stood at the

end furthest from the door, so that she and Basil had time to have a critical look at one another before they met.

There could be no greater contrast than that between these two people who had once been lovers: he suave, self-assured, well-groomed, well-fed, with his dark, energetically poised head and the suspicion of a satisfied smile which played about his thin but finely moulded lips; she vainly struggling for composure, with rapidly changing colour and wide, frightened eyes, which told their tale at the first glance.

The experiment, which with the woman had been so conspicuous a failure, had with the man proved itself a no less brilliant success. The 'push' he had boasted of had been crowned, as 'push' always deserves to be crowned in this world of hard realities. It seemed as though the sacrifice he had made—and it had been a real sacrifice at the moment—had propitiated the Fates in his favour. Everything, positively everything, had happened exactly as he would have elected it to happen had he had the pulling of the strings of his own destiny. People who were convenient to him had come into power, people who were inconvenient to him had fallen into disgrace; other people had died quite unexpectedly, or become invalided in the most obliging manner, apparently for the sole purpose of allowing the rising young diplomat to step into their places. It was in this way that he had succeeded in becoming the youngest Minister in Her Majesty's service. And what was by no means to be accounted among the smallest pieces of luck which had befallen him was that the heiress with the miles of property in Scotland and the slight cast in her eye had lived just long enough to present him with two promising young Rockinghams (at present treading in their father's footsteps at Harrow), and had then considerably betaken herself to a better world, leaving the disposal of her fortune unreservedly in her husband's hands.

Except that his voice was a little deeper and his black hair a little thinner, he was exactly the Basil of old days. In his youth he had never been particularly youthful, and now in his middle-age he reaped the advantage of that circumstance, for even people who had not seen him for

twenty years could not perceive much difference in his appearance. It was only that he had become a slightly enlarged and, so to say, more emphatic copy of himself.

'I did not know that you were here,' were the first words which Charlotte was aware of uttering, after Mr. Rockingham had established himself in the chair to which she tremblingly motioned him. 'That is to say, I thought you were to be at Collingwood for Christmas, and would be gone again by this time.'

She was painfully ill at ease—up to what point was the past to be ignored? Was it to be 'Basil' and 'Charlotte' between them, or 'Mr. Rockingham' and 'Lady Nevyl'?

The decision followed quickly. 'You have been correctly informed, Lady Nevyl, but I was kept in town by business at Christmas-time. I am making up for it now, you see. There is no such thing as being let off a promise made to my present amiable hostess. It is in her name that I am here to-day.'

'Oh,' interrupted Charlotte, somewhat crestfallen, 'it is Mrs. Byrd who has sent you?'

'Yes, it is Mrs. Byrd who has sent me.'

In this respect also he had remained his old self. This was quite the bluntness of the boy Basil, who never took to himself the credit of any sentiment which he did not feel.

'She was anxious to convey to you her condolences, and, having learnt from me how old is the acquaintance I can claim, we agreed that I might take the risk of having the door shut in my face,' and he smiled the smile of a man in whose face no door had ever yet been shut. 'It has been a most shocking occurrence,' he added immediately, 'and you must have suffered terribly.'

This time Charlotte could find nothing to say. In her nature also there was an obstinate fibre of honesty, and to give the assent expected of her surpassed her powers of dissimulation. Instead of speaking, she swiftly raised her eyes to his face, not with any purpose, but on some irresistible impulse.

There was a moment's silence in the room. Mr. Rockingham had learnt a good deal in that one instant. Amongst other things he had learnt that, though Charlotte

was terribly *passée*, her eyes were quite as blue and almost as beautiful as of yore.

‘It is a strange case, altogether,’ he observed, with ready presence of mind, ‘two lives thus unexpectedly extinguished. I hear there is even some difficulty in tracing the next possessor. Or has that point already been solved?’

‘I don’t think so; the matter is still being investigated.’

The future not seeming readily to yield a subject of conversation, Mr. Rockingham turned with perfect self-possession to the past. He began by kind inquiries after her sisters, and in two minutes more, somewhat to his own astonishment, they were embarked on a full flood of reminiscences.

‘And that dear old brick house,’ asked Charlotte presently, ‘what has become of it?’ She was reviving now in the congenial atmosphere of these memories.

‘I sold the house directly after my poor father’s death. I believe there is a shoe manufactory established there now.’

‘A shoe manufactory!’ Charlotte was aghast. ‘And the garden? All those beautiful peach trees?’

The garden, it seemed, had been the subject of a separate transaction, having passed into the possession of an enterprising London market-gardener.

Again Charlotte stifled a sigh. ‘I have never tasted any peaches like those that grew along that south wall,’ she mused aloud.

Mr. Rockingham smiled indulgently.

‘Most complimentary to my father’s gardening; but isn’t that stretching the point just a little? They couldn’t, after all, hold the palm to hot-house peaches, and you seem to have miles of glass here at Morton.’

‘Oh yes, but hot-houses are not the same as—as gardens. Don’t you remember, Bas—Mr. Rockingham, how I used to hold my pinafore to catch the plums while you gathered them? And the day that I fell into the water-butt and you pulled me out?’

Her courage had returned to her, and with it her colour. At any price she must know what part those old days played in his thoughts.

‘Really, Lady Nevvill,’ said Mr. Rockingham una-

bashed, 'your memory beats mine entirely. I distinctly recollect pulling a limp little parcel out of the water-butt, but are you certain it was not your sister Maria? She was always stumbling into something.'

At that 'Lady Nevyl' Charlotte shrank back, almost as though she had received a slap in the face. Turning from this dangerous ground, she made a desperate plunge into commonplaces.

For five minutes all went well, but presently a chance and trivial circumstance gave rise to a remark which betrayed where her thoughts had been all this time. It had been during one of the pauses of the conversation that a soft sound had arisen at the window, and several small feathered heads, their outlines blurred by the falling snow, were seen bobbing up and down behind the pane.

'Hungry weather for the birds,' Mr. Rockingham observed, glad of having so obvious a remark to make. 'Why, what's come to them? Ah, it's the rook that has frightened them off. Have you got a rookery here?'

'Yes, but I almost wish there were no rooks about the place,' said Charlotte, with a quiver in her voice.

'Does the cawing disturb you? I believe that many people find it trying to the nerves.'

'I do,' she muttered between her teeth. 'Surely you remember the rooks in the beech-grove?' and she turned to him with a sort of desperate appeal; 'and the way they would shoot backwards and forwards across the sky on autumn evenings?'

'And the excellent rook-pies they would make into in spring—oh yes, I remember it all perfectly. What's that striking? Positively one o'clock? It's fortunate that they are late lunchers at Collingwood.'

'I am an early luncher,' said Charlotte, with some hesitation. 'So if you do not mind a dull meal—'

'Unluckily, I am pledged to be back,' said Mr. Rockingham, rising somewhat hastily, for he had begun to feel that, despite all his coolness and dexterity, the ice over which he was skating was perilously thin. At the last moment only, as he met the wistful look in her upturned blue eyes, something like relenting came over him.

'I am going on to Bromly from Collingwood,' he observed, just before turning away, 'so that we shall be neighbours yet for a few weeks to come. So not good-bye, but *au revoir!*' And taking up her hand, he carried it respectfully to his lips. It was a trick he had learnt at foreign courts, and which he occasionally made use of when he wished to be effective, but Charlotte did not know this; she took the incident for very much more than it was worth, and remained at the window, all in a flutter, long after the carriage had driven away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AFTER-SUMMER.

THAT evening, having dismissed her maid, Lady Nevyll sat for long before her toilet-table, lost in the contemplation of her image in the glass. The warm flush that had sprung to her face at the moment that Basil's lips touched her hand had not left it all day.

After all, why should it be too late?

This was the thought stirring in her mind as she bent forward and scanned her own features searchingly. To go to the root of the matter, what had she to build upon? Which of her charms had been saved out of the wreck? She began to go through a minute enumeration. Chief among all were her eyes; these were undoubtedly her trump card. Her figure was still youthful, and she had always had faultless teeth, though few people were aware of this, seeing that during these last eighteen years she had almost forgotten how to smile. They were still dazzling and intact, and, as she smiled at herself now experimentally in the glass, there was no doubt that the pearly flash lighted up her faded face wonderfully. Her hands, too, were beautiful, with blue veins showing under the transparent skin and palms that were soft and rosy as those of a child. Lastly there was her hair. It had preserved its

colour tolerably, thought Charlotte, as she shook out the long, silky locks, which were of so pale golden a tint that the slight sprinkling of silver served only to give them a delicately *poudré* appearance. She began to wonder whether it would not suit her better if it were dressed high?

There had been as many fluctuations of dejection as of elation during Basil's short visit, but that last moment had made up for everything. It was at that moment that an amazing possibility had flashed into her mind: why should it be too late to redeem the past?

So utterly unused had Charlotte grown to thinking of herself as anything but middle-aged, and definitely laid on the shelf, that at first she felt almost a little giddy with the audacity of her new idea; but hope comes naturally to the heart of woman, and before she had laid her head on the pillow that night she had resolved that a new life should be entered upon without delay.

Next day Lady Nevyll's London dressmaker was astonished by receiving an order for a new mourning-gown, which was to be completed with the least possible delay, her ladyship having come to the conclusion that neither of the two black costumes which had been delivered last were satisfactory as to style and fit. Madame Browne, the dressmaker, was dumbfounded. Hitherto Lady Nevyll had been quite the most convenient of her customers; not once in these ten years had she so much as sent back a bodice to be altered. Whence, then, this new fastidiousness? And in so young a widow? It was more than Madame Browne could grasp.

Madame Browne was not the only person who was astonished by a letter from Morton Hall that day. Lady Nevyll's staymaker, as well as her shoemaker, was likewise honoured by unexpected communications, while a certain Mademoiselle Rougier was urgently consulted by the same post as to whether there were no possibility of constructing a widow's cap which, while coming up to the requirements of custom, would yet not act as a complete extinguisher of the mourning widow's charms.

The difficulties in her way were verily great, but for the

moment Charlotte was dauntless. In all but the most commonplace of female natures there lurk unexpected resources, and in this crisis of her life Charlotte developed an inventiveness of which she had never believed herself capable. Her apathy fell from her like a cloak, and a feverish activity took its place. In some subtle, indescribable way she contrived to make of her widow's weeds a better frame to her fading charms than any of the costly robes which Madame Browne had thought good to send her in past days, and which she had put on almost without so much as a glance into the glass to see whether the colour suited her or not.

Were Charlotte's hopes absolutely vain? By no means. At first, indeed, a sort of patronising pity had had the upper hand in Basil's mind. 'Poor thing!' had been the thought with which he had turned his back on Morton that snowy day. And yet the meeting had not been without its effect on him as well. He had always preserved a good-natured interest in 'little Chatty,' and he had been quite sincere in hoping that her life would be as happy and fortunate as his own was. The discovery that this was not the case, and that not all Sir Gilbert Nevyll's riches had been able to cast *his* image into the shade, could nevertheless not fail to have a very soothing and gratifying effect upon such a person as Mr. Rockingham. If in one sense it lowered Charlotte in his estimation, it infinitely raised her in another. In any case it proved that she had good taste. Possibly, too, he was just a trifle awed by the depth of a passion of which he knew himself—for he knew himself very well—to be utterly incapable.

During the whole of that afternoon these thoughts worked together in Basil's mind, and that evening, just about the time that Charlotte was consulting her face in the glass, Mr. Rockingham was standing on the hearthrug of his bedroom, his back to the fire, his hands buried in the pockets of his smoking-jacket, and on his face the look of a man who is debating a serious question within himself.

'Upon my word, I am beginning to think that there is something in the idea,' he presently remarked aloud, look-

ing down confidentially at his embroidered slippers. 'I can't well do without marrying again, and the chances are that Sir Gilbert has been generous about the provisions. It's not as though I had my way to make now, and besides, marrying Lady Nevyll sounds rather different from marrying Miss Dickson. Poor little Chatty! She must be terribly fond of me.' And he looked down again at his slippers with a smile that was almost a little pensive.

'If only she hadn't lost her looks so terribly. In any case, I must have another look at her before I leave the neighbourhood. Black doesn't suit her, that is quite clear.'

The result of these cogitations on the hearthrug was that Mr. Rockingham allowed himself to be pressed by Mrs. Byrd into prolonging his stay at Collingwood for another week. During that week he saw Charlotte again. It was on leaving church on Sunday that he had his opportunity. Mr. Rockingham always was very punctilious in the observance of Sunday, not only because it looked well, but also because he had a slight leaning towards religion. At any rate, he believed in a Supreme Being, though possibly if his heart had been searched, it would have been found that he defined this Supreme Being to himself as 'The Person who made me.' He was quite certain that nothing short of a God could be the author of his, Basil Rockingham's, existence, consequently he felt the deepest respect for his Creator.

The first sensation which Mr. Rockingham experienced on meeting Lady Nevyll on the steps of the church was one of pleasurable surprise. He had always been fastidious about woman's dress, and he wondered now what could have given him the idea that black did not suit Charlotte. Those Ophelia-like orbs, with their chronic tinge of melancholy, looked particularly in place behind a crape veil—she might have been a captive gazing at him from between her prison-bars with eyes that pleaded for deliverance. He scanned her critically, point by point, even while dividing indifferent remarks between her and Mrs. Byrd, measuring her by the 'embassadress' standard which he had before his mind's eye, and, with an ever-

growing sense of surprise and satisfaction, he admitted to himself that in no vital point did she fall short of the mark. What was wanting in *aplomb* and decision of bearing could easily be supplied by practice.

'She has certainly picked up style,' reflected Basil, as, having helped Charlotte into her carriage, he watched her sink back in the corner, half buried in a mass of costly black fur with which only a figure so slender as hers could have dared to load itself. 'It is odd that I did not notice it the other day.'

So deeply impressed was he with his new discovery that he actually went to call at Morton two days later, undeterred by the thought of what people might say. This time, too, he had no engagement which necessitated his flight before luncheon, neither was the awkwardness of the *tête-à-tête* half so palpable as the other day. Charlotte was altogether another person.

From the moment that the spark of hope had begun to revive in her heart she had lost that dejected droop of head and shoulders, that indecision of glance which had for years past made her so dispiriting a figure to gaze upon. The impression produced by the meeting on the church steps had not escaped her attention, and a marked increase of self-confidence had been the result.

With every meeting—and in the weeks that followed Basil and Charlotte met often—this change about her became more apparent. In proportion as the chance of regaining her old lover grew, in exact proportion did her whole being revive under the delicious influence of this late-born hope.

It was the strangest, most blissful time of her life, a sort of after-summer blooming out suddenly in the midst of late autumn.

And, in truth, Charlotte was not feeding her hope on shadows. Basil's passion for her had indeed been dead for years, but it still remained true that it had been the only passion of his life. A little of the poetry of that early romance could not fail still to linger about her in his eyes. Besides, he had found out that Sir Gilbert's widow was provided for on an absolutely princely scale and quite un-

hampered by conditions. There were a great many reasons in favour of the plan, and though he was not yet prepared to commit himself to the last irrevocable step—even supposing that the rules of decorum had made this possible at this date—yet he deliberately extended his stay at Bromley for a full month beyond the date originally fixed. In autumn he intended to revisit the neighbourhood—for it was almost certain that autumn would find him still in England. Meanwhile he must be showing himself in London, for Parliament was sitting and most of his influential friends were gathered on the spot.

It was from Bromley that Mr. Rockingham drove over to say good-bye to Lady Nevyl. He found her in one of the hot-houses, seated on a bench with a novel in her hand. She had cast aside the heavy fur cloak and hood in which she had walked down from the house, retaining only a black lace scarf which she had draped mantilla-wise over her head. It was the first time that Basil had seen her without her widow's cap, and he could not fail to notice the exquisite effect produced by the tracery of the black lace upon the cloudy gold of her hair.

'What do you say to my idea?' asked Charlotte, as Mr. Rockingham approached. 'Is not this a splendid way of cheating this detestable climate? To be sure, potted pomegranates and laurels are a rather poor substitute for Florence, but at any rate they are better than naked beeches and elms.'

'If Florence agrees with you as well as its substitute does,' answered Mr. Rockingham, staring hard at her face, 'I should say that certainly you ought always to live among the pomegranates and the laurels.'

Charlotte looked away, colouring with pleasure. Oh, how glad she was at that moment that she had draped the mantilla so carefully! It was of the utmost importance that Basil should carry away with him a favourable image of her, a last impression which would dwell with him till autumn.

'Will you sit down? Or shall we take a turn through the other houses? One can take quite a long walk here without ever having to leave one's shelter.'

She rose and led the way, Mr. Rockingham following in her footsteps on the narrow tiled path.

‘Oh, *do* you know the latest news?’ said Charlotte presently, over her shoulder, just as they entered the palm-house. ‘The heiress is found—Mr. Dunnet has unearthed her at last.’

‘It is a *she*, then?’ observed Mr. Rockingham indignantly, for he was gazing approvingly at the back of Charlotte’s coiffure.

‘Yes. It is one of Sir Gilbert’s Austrian relatives, it seems. Some third or fourth cousin—I haven’t really inquired into the matter—a young woman who is supposed to be living in some village in the mountains, unless, indeed, she has died of starvation by this time, for she seems to have been in wretched circumstances.’

‘Good gracious, she will be a sort of savage, I suppose. It will be most unpleasant for you, for, after all, it will be expected that you should treat her as a relation. Can she read and write?’

‘Scarcely in English, I should fancy, but she will have money enough to keep as many masters as she likes,’ and Charlotte heaved the ghost of a sigh. After all, now that it was coming to the point, there would be some bitterness in having to yield up the place which she had occupied for so long. ‘It will soon be time for me to be packing up my goods and chattels,’ she added, still in that tone of slight aggrivement.

‘Shall I, then, not find you here in autumn? I had quite counted upon doing so.’

Charlotte smiled to herself at the tinge of anxiety in his voice.

‘Oh yes, you will find me—at least you will not have far to look. I have only got to move over to the dower-house, the old Hall as they call it—not more than a mile from here. It has been latterly given up to the manager, but they are getting it put into order now. It seems that the Nevyls are always very particular about their widows being well cared for after their deaths, whatever may have been the case during their lifetime.’ Her voice for one moment had grown hard and bitter. She plucked off a

leaf in passing, and crumpled it up angrily between her fingers.

‘That will suit admirably,’ Mr. Rockingham was saying. ‘For I am not only pledged to Mrs. Byrd, but have likewise consented to make another stay at Bromley. I believe they want me to do something for that young fellow of theirs. Perhaps I shall be able to assist you in civilising the Austrian savage.’

‘And about what time may I count upon your assistance?’ asked Charlotte over her shoulder, her good-humour quite restored.

‘Scarcely before September. I am pledged to London for the next few months, and in August I shall have to take the youngsters somewhere for the holidays. So these are the peaches of which you spoke so slightly the other day, and yet they look as though they deserved more attention.’

From between the thick green leaves which covered the walls of this house the smelling fruit peeped in innumerable shades of green, pink, and purple. Just such peaches had grown along the wall of Doctor Rockingham’s sunny garden beside the homely brick house, but they had put out their fruit in August and not in February, therein lay the difference; and just in this way had Basil and Charlotte wandered along alone between the fruit trees on a certain brilliant summer day, only that then they had had a blue sky overhead instead of a roof of glass, and they had been young instead of on the verge of middle-age, and therein also lay a very great difference.

Charlotte made no answer to Basil’s remark about the peaches, and Mr. Rockingham, too, became suddenly silent. They were both thinking of the same thing. The past had risen up and was usurping the place of the present.

The daylight had been declining gradually during the last ten minutes, and, as Charlotte opened the door at the end of the peach-house, a veil of mystery seemed already to hang over the flowers in the house beyond. From out of the mass of dark foliage the white camelias shone like ghostly stars, while only the most brilliant of the clusters of red fuchsia glowed faintly through the falling dusk.

'This is the end of our walk,' said Charlotte, standing still. 'We must go back the way we came.'

'But not without taking with us a souvenir of the expedition,' answered Mr. Rockingham readily, as he eyed the camelia bushes with an experienced glance. 'They have a big dinner at Bromley to-night, and this choice of buttonholes is more than tantalising. Is your gardener inexorable, or may I help myself?'

'Wait, let me gather it for you,' said Charlotte eagerly, while on tiptoe, with head thrown back and arms outstretched, she reached down the branch on which she had espied one specially fine blossom. Seen thus against the fading light which softened the angles of her otherwise too sharply cut profile, it would have been quite possible to mistake her thinness for girlish slightness, her languid grace for youthfulness. It was not the charm of the fresh flower, of course, not the intoxicating scent which bursts from the newly opened blossom, but does there not cling a glamour of poetry about the dry flower as well, the flower that has been preserved as a memory of other days? To Basil, at least, who in spirit had just been walking his father's fruit-garden, some such mysterious glamour seemed to be floating in the heavily-scented air. When Charlotte approached him with the white camelia in her hand, he found it quite natural that she should volunteer to put it into his buttonhole herself, and while she was busy fastening it he positively came nearer to feeling agitated than he had felt for these last nineteen years.

Suddenly she looked up into his face. The camelia was just fastened.

'Will you keep it till September?' she asked, with a touch of audacity which in her was new and strange.

'Yes,' he replied; and then, having debated within himself for the space of two seconds, he bent and touched her forehead with his lips.

'For the sake of old times,' he had the presence of mind immediately to add. It could not be said exactly that he had acted on impulse, for he believed at that time that it would probably be expedient for him to marry this woman and yet his instinctive caution had urged him to put in

that saving clause, just in case of any unforeseen contingency.

Charlotte had scarcely heard the last words. Her brain was in a whirl, her heart in a tumult of bliss. Not till long after he had left her did she even partially recover her composure.

‘Till September!’ Oh, when would the summer be lived through? Surely now she held her happiness safely within her grasp—surely this time it could not escape her? Till September!

She was back in the house by this time, and the long row of hot-houses were shrouded in the dusk. And still it was not yet so dark but that the pomegranates might not have been seen slowly shaking their glowing heads and the frolicsome fuchsias putting out their delicate, white-tipped tongues as though in impish derision of the scene of which they had just been witness.

Who knows whether they were not making fun of this faded woman who believed herself loved!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE NEW HALL AND THE OLD.

ACCORDING to the wish expressed by Mr. Dunnet, Ulrica had telegraphed from Calais naming the hour of her arrival. It seemed to her a quite unnecessary precaution, but there could be no harm in humouring the old lawyer so far. She was going straight to Morton without stopping in London, for she knew that Lady Nevyll was passing the winter in the country, and it was only to see Lady Nevyll that she was visiting England.

Ulrica had travelled night and day, for her impatience and curiosity had not permitted her to rest on the way. But now, as on the evening of the third day she neared her journey's end, both impatience and curiosity were perceptibly flagging, and all that she was conscious of, as she leant

back in the corner of her carriage, was the earnest desire to lay her aching head on a pillow and stretch her cramped limbs for a long night's rest.

So overpowered was she with an irresistible drowsiness that she probably would have missed her station, had not the guard, on whose mercy she had thrown herself on leaving London, proved himself equal to the occasion.

Ulrica started out of her corner, rubbing her eyes vigorously. They were just gliding from the dense darkness into a glare of gaslight. It must be a particularly well-lighted station, she thought, much more so than the average small country station, of which she had had ample experience in the course of the last two hours. This also was nothing more than a small country station, as she ascertained by peering through the panes clouded with damp, but it seemed to be a particularly lively one. The solitary little building was all ablaze, and upon the miniature platform quite a crowd of people were assembled, most of them with their hats in their hands, and all of them with their faces turned towards the slackening train.

'Is anything the matter?' asked Ulrica of the guard. 'Has there been an accident or anything?'

'No, miss, it's not an accident, it's a reception. It's the tenants waiting to cheer the new proprietor.'

It did not occur to Ulrica to ask whose tenants they were; the question was profoundly indifferent to her as she took her shabby little bag down from the net and descended from her second-class carriage.

The descending was easy enough, but further progress was by no means such a simple matter. The crowd on the platform were all peering in one direction, all gravitating towards the first-class carriages. All at once there was a deafening cheer—a head with a bonnet had appeared at one of the windows, a very ancient head with a wonderfully hideous bonnet, not at all the object one would expect to unchain this burst of enthusiasm. Before it had quite swelled to its loudest note the cheer broke off abruptly at the same time that the wearer of the bonnet drew back hastily from the window.

'That can't be the right 'un,' said one man to his neigh-

bour; 'don't ee see how Mr. Dunnet is hushin' us up? Let's keep an eye upon him and we'll know when to sing out.'

Ulrica had been near enough to hear the words. She turned towards where the men were looking, and caught sight of the same elderly Englishman who had visited her in the Marienhof in company with Herr Prell, the notary. The clean-shaven face and the iron-grey laurel-wreath were unmistakable, only in the Marienhof the face had been perfectly composed, while now it betrayed some signs of agitation, and the grey locks had been plastered into faultless symmetry, whereas at present the night breeze was ruffling them at its will, as Mr. Dunnet, bareheaded, raced up and down the platform, his strides growing ever longer and his expression more distressed, as the train, after its short halt, was preparing to start again. All at once the true meaning of the situation flashed upon Ulrica. With her bag in her hand she stepped up to Mr. Dunnet.

'Is it for me you are looking?' she asked, loud enough to be heard by the crowd behind.

Mr. Dunnet started and stared. In the crowd there was a silence, a moment of hesitation, and then, at sight of the profound inclination which followed upon the lawyer's start, the deafening cheer burst out again, ten times more deafening than the one elicited by the sight of the bonnet at the window.

'I wish they wouldn't shout so,' said Ulrica wearily, 'my head is aching unbearably. I should like to get to bed as soon as possible. Is it far to walk?'

'Surely you are not thinking of walking?'

'Well, then, how am I to get there? Is there a carriage to be had?'

'The carriage is here, of course, Countess. Allow me to conduct you to it.'

A lane was formed on the instant, and Ulrica, on Mr. Dunnet's arm, passed out of the station-house to where another crowd was waiting round the Morton carriage.

'Am I to get in here?' she asked, staring in surprise at the big carriage with the tall brown horses and the liveried coachman.

Mr. Dunnet bowed in silence. More deafening cheers followed them as they drove off.

‘What do they make that noise for?’ asked Ulrica. ‘Surely it can’t all be on account of me? Is that the custom?’

‘The custom would be to do a great deal more, Countess. If it were not for the very peculiar circumstances of the case, you would have had a reception more worthy of the occasion. I *did* think of allowing the bonfires, even though an illumination would scarcely have been decorous; but in consideration of the recent and so tragical end of the late proprietor, I was not certain of your approval. I hope I have acted rightly?’

‘Thank Heaven!’ was Ulrica’s sole answer. ‘The illumination would have hurt my eyes, while at least that shouting only hurts my ears.’

Mr. Dunnet breathed a sigh of relief.

‘And yet it would have been a very magnificent sight,’ he added rather wistfully, for the honour of the family and anything that served to add to its outward splendour lay very near to his heart. ‘To begin with, there would have been a flower arch at the station and wreaths round all the pillars, and probably an illuminated inscription instead of only the gas put on, which was all I felt justified in sanctioning. And then there would have been a mounted escort of the chief tenants riding on each side of the carriage at this moment, and the lodge, of course, would have been one mass of light, and another arch at the gate; this is the gate we are passing through just now.’

‘Are we there already? Where is my bag?’ asked Ulrica, sitting up.

‘There is no hurry,’ said Mr. Dunnet, with a slight smile; ‘the avenue is two miles and a half long. Ah, if those bonfires had been burning, you would have had a chance of judging of the trees. And from this point, just from this bend we are passing now, you would have had the first view of the house, the outline picked out with tiny lamps, and when we get to the next turn the first rockets would have gone up.’

Mr. Dunnet peered eagerly out of the window, almost

as though he were pointing out an actual sight, instead of only dwelling regretfully upon what might have been. He was prepared to expand very much more on the subject, but in face of Ulrica's weary silence his eloquence died out. She looked listlessly through the window, following with her eyes the light of the carriage-lamps as it glided over the branches of the rhododendron and holly bushes which bordered the avenue, lighting up single leaves vividly for one moment, and leaving them again to be swallowed up in darkness. It seemed to her that the drive would never end.

At length the light fell on no more rhododendrons, the avenue widened suddenly to a broad gravel space, and with a sweep and a clatter they drew up under a massive stone porch. Here it was almost as light as day, for the enormous doors had been flung wide open, and from the hall within the light burst out in a broad band. Ulrica was half-blinded with it, as, with Mr. Dunnet by her side, she mounted the carpeted steps. It was only when she had mounted the last step that she became aware of the two long rows of servants drawn up on each side of the hall: men in and out of livery on one side, beginning with a white-haired butler and ending with a tiny page-boy who might have been the fullstop put to a sentence; and on the other side women, headed by a portly dame in a much more magnificent black silk dress than Ulrica herself had ever possessed, and ranging through all the stages of smiling, white-capped housemaids and buxom-faced kitchen helps, down to the most youthful of the scullery-maids, whose duties consisted solely in the emptying of the pails.

Ulrica stood still, almost in dismay. 'Who are they all?' she asked of Mr. Dunnet.

'They are your servants,' gently responded the lawyer.

A sense of hopeless bewilderment came over Ulrica. Her servants! Why, there were at least thirty of them. She had never even known that there were people in the world who kept thirty servants. So astonished was she that all the response she made to the deep curtseys and profound inclinations which were being executed on both sides of her was a hasty and somewhat haughty nod.

'Where is my room?' she asked, turning to Mr. Dunnet. 'I am very tired; and can I have something to eat?'

Could she have something to eat? Oh, blessed ignorance! As though the arrangement of the *menu* for this, the first meal of which the new-made heiress was to partake under her own roof, had not been exercising Mr. Dunnet's mind for at least a full week past; for a family lawyer has occasionally got to play the part of a maid-of-all-work, and when there is no one else by whose obvious duty it is to plan illuminations or marshal the order of dishes, he has, perforce, to look to the thing himself. Anything to eat! As though Monsieur Maillac, the French *chef de cuisine*, had not put his very best foot foremost in the concoction of *entrées* and sauces of which he felt confident that they could not fail to captivate the heart of even the most fastidious of heiresses; as though the venerable butler had not condescended to look to the silver himself, so that the brilliancy of this inaugural dinner should not be dimmed by even a single speck upon a single fork; and as though the head-gardener had not mercilessly ransacked his pet hot-houses in order to impress upon his new mistress a favorable opinion of his taste in table decoration. All these people were trembling for their future; each one knew that a single frown of the heiress would be enough to oust him from the comfortable berth so long occupied; each one therefore had strained his efforts to the utmost. But, oh, woful disappointment, oh, ignominious collapse! The new-made mistress of Morton Hall would not hear of sitting through an elaborate dinner; she would go to her room at once, and all she wanted was a mouthful of food sent there—a piece of bread-and-butter, a glass of milk, anything would do. Monsieur Maillac turned pale with an enraged disappointment when he heard the order given. The idea of that sauce *au suprême* having been mixed in vain, and of that iced pineapple cream wasting its sweetness upon the desert air of the servants' hall! Probably it was for this reason that this artist of the kitchen seemed inclined to view his new mistress unfavourably, when, half an hour later, impressions were being exchanged over the supper-table. Certainly it was rather trying for his temper

to see James and Henry tucking in gleefully to the capon which had been roasted with such loving care, and to watch Anna Maria, the under-housemaid, smacking her lips over another of his *chef-d'œuvres*. It could only be his disappointment that had coloured his vision, for in general Monsieur Maillac was a pretty correct judge of female beauty.

'She has no *chic*,' he pronounced disdainfully; 'I say not that she is ugly, but *chic? Pas du tout!*'

'I should like to know who could have *chic* in that gown she had on!' retorted Mademoiselle Séraphine, the French maid whom Mr. Dunnet had temporarily engaged in Ulrica's name, though without consulting her. 'Wait till I begin to dress her!'

'It's a gown I wouldn't take if she were to make me a present of it to-morrow,' giggled one of the housemaids. 'Did you see the patch at the side?'

'I saw the patch,' meditatively replied James the footman, to whom both the giggle and the question seemed to be more especially addressed; 'but I saw her heyes as well, and they seemed to me the wonderfulest blazers I ever *did* see.'

'And her hair,' broke in Mademoiselle Séraphine, who seemed inclined to be enthusiastic, and who on this account probably had not disdained to-night to grace the servants' hall with her somewhat meagre presence, '*sa chevelure!* I just caught sight of a bit of the plait under her hat—so thick and dark! It will be a happiness to dress such hair!' and the Frenchwoman's nervous yellow fingers began to work about in the air, as though she were already operating on Ulrica's head. 'Just wait till you see her hair *coiffé*, in a diadem over her forehead, *comme ça!* and she in pink silk. She will be *magnifique* in pink silk, I tell you.'

Meanwhile the subject of these discussions had long since fallen fast asleep in the gorgeous four-poster, which she had at first failed to recognise as a bed, it seemed to her so much more like a miniature stage in a theatre, on which whole plays could conveniently be acted. She had been too desperately tired, however, to wonder very much at anything, and having resolutely declined all offers of as-

sistance, had laid her head on the pillow and glided straight into dreamland.

A gentle rustling sound in the room was the first thing that awakened her. She opened her eyes and saw that it was broad daylight, though the blinds were still down. Kneeling before the fireplace was a young woman in a lilac print dress and with a white muslin mob-cap on her head.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Ulrica in surprise.

‘I’m lighting the fire, my lady, it’s a very cool morning.’

‘But I never have a fire to get up by, and I always light it myself. What o’clock is it?’

‘Eight o’clock, my lady.’

‘Good gracious!’ cried Ulrica, starting up in bed, ‘two hours behind my time!’

Perhaps the astonishment on Anna Maria’s face reminded Ulrica of the true state of the case. She sank back again among her pillows. This was not the Marienhof, there were no cows to be milked, no pails to be scrubbed, no work waiting for her anywhere; even the fire was being lit without her help, though, from force of habit, it was all that Ulrica could do not to spring to Anna Maria’s assistance. Now that she had realised the situation she felt in no particular hurry to get up; it was rather pleasant to lie thus still among the luxurious pillows, watching Anna Maria, as, the fire being lit, she began to move about the room, pulling up the blind and putting chairs straight. It was agreeable, and, above all, it was novel. The room itself was pleasant to look at, with its wonderful white-and-gold ceiling, its rococo furniture, and marble mantel-piece with the big mirror let in above. Yesterday she had been too tired to notice all this, but the long sleep had rested her, she was ready for new impressions. ‘And Lady Nevyl?’ The thought flashed into her mind while she still lay among her pillows. It was only now that she asked herself wonderingly where Lady Nevyl was all this time, why she had not seen her last night? Impatience and curiosity sprang up once more like giants refreshed, and would not let her rest. She started up again, this time in good earnest.

‘Where is Lady Nevyl?’ she asked of the housemaid who was just approaching the door.

‘Lady Nevyll, my lady? She’s at the Old Hall; she moved over there a fortnight ago.’

‘Where is the Old Hall? Is it far?’

‘Not more than a mile across the park. Shall I bring you your hot water, my lady?’

‘Hot water? What for? I don’t need any hot water. Yes, you can go, I don’t want anything.’

Ulrica began to dress hastily, but presently, as she passed by the window, she stood still in surprise. The view she was gazing upon was not in reality half so beautiful as the view which was to be seen from any single window of the Marienhof, but its features were entirely novel to Ulrica. There everything had been pure nature, here everything was unmixed art. It had cost centuries of time and millions of money to create such a park as this in the midst of such a country as this, a flat and featureless tract of land which on one side stretched unbroken to the horizon, while on the other a line of low hills formed a distant border. But there are few things which money and time cannot do; it was a magnificent stretch of park which lay unrolled before Ulrica’s eyes, colourless still, indeed, and rigid in its winter leaflessness, but foreshadowing, in its glimpses of deep glades, and in its hints of winding alleys, the summer beauties that were to come. When those noble breadths of lawn should have brightened into emerald, and those branches that were now cut like a black fretwork against the sky would be feathered with the leaves of elm and beech, how glorious the prospect must be. Several men were at work raking the flower-beds which bordered the lawn immediately in front of the house; a wheelbarrow with some of the very first weeds of the season was just being wheeled out of sight; signs of care and order were visible everywhere. And all this belonged to her, all these people were working in her service; it did not seem possible to realise this as a fact.

When her toilet was completed it was almost guiltily that Ulrica, with her hat and jacket on, stole down the wide staircase to the hall below. She did not want to meet Mr. Dunnet and to be questioned as to the object of this early walk. That nine o’clock is not an hour at which first

visits, or visits of any sort, were paid, Ulrica was not aware. To her nine o'clock meant at least the middle of the forenoon, and she started to call on Lady Nevvill with quite as easy a mind as though she were starting for her round of sick-calls at Glockenau. If she wished to avoid Mr. Dunnet, it was solely because she feared to betray her motive.

One mile across the park, the housemaid had said; that was nothing to Ulrica, and as for the direction, there would be sure to be plenty of people about from whom she could ask her way. Ulrica struck out at haphazard across the park, following the first alley on which she chanced, and never once turning her head until the road led her to a raised mound on which stood one single magnificent plane tree with a bench running round its trunk. There Ulrica instinctively stood still and looked about her. She almost exclaimed aloud in her astonishment. What was that splendid pile of building, looming in its chilly grandeur against the mass of woods behind? Surely a palace fit for a king. The tall pillared centre and the wide-spreading wings of the palace-like mansion stood bathed in the first burst of morning sunshine. Ulrica rubbed her eyes and looked again. Was that really the house she had just left? Was that Morton Hall? *Her* house? It seemed scarcely credible. With a feeling of increasing wonder she pursued her way. Presently she began to grow impatient. It seemed to her that there were no limits to her domain. Wooded tracts, rich pastures, deep glades, she passed by all these in a never-ending succession, she asked her way over and over again of a stray gamekeeper, of a labourer who was mending a wire fence, of a village boy engaged in a surreptitious birdnesting expedition, and always the answer was the same—she was still on the private ground of the New Hall. The 'New' Hall happened to be a couple of hundred years old, but in contradistinction to the dower-house, which was a couple of hundred years older, it was generally thus designated.

Somewhat breathless and very hungry, Ulrica stood at length on what was obviously a public thoroughfare, and now she had not much more to do than to cross the high-

road in order to be within the grounds of the Old Hall, which with its mantle of ivy was a far less stately, but a much more quaint and picturesque, building than the chief residence.

Coming in by the open gate, Ulrica found herself all at once close to the house, and with a momentary feeling of dismay her pace slackened. She was about to see Gilbert's widow, and her heart beat tumultuously at the thought. For the first time she wondered in what state of mind she should find Lady Nevyll. She could never have loved Gilbert, that was certain—not as Ulrica, despite the bitterness in her heart, knew that she loved him—but yet, was it not possible that she was weeping for him? Might not the awfulness of death have melted that icy barrier which stood between them? To have been Gilbert's wife for so many years, to have been loved by that so false and fickle and yet so lovable man, and to have remained untouched by the magic of his presence—it seemed so incredible to Ulrica that something like a fellow-feeling of pity stole into her generous heart, making her forget for one moment that this woman was her rival, and letting her remember only that they were both mourning for one man. At the very least surely she must dwell on his memory with remorseful regret, and unconsciously Ulrica stepped more lightly over the gravel, as though not to disturb the new-made widow's meditations.

The house-door stood open, showing a long stone-flagged hall within. Ulrica entered and looked about her; there was no servant visible anywhere, but a flight of steep, old-fashioned steps led to the floor above. She mounted boldly, and then hesitated once more at the sight of the various doors, all absolutely alike with their heavy oaken carving. But her hesitation was not for long; behind one of the doors voices could be distinctly heard. She walked towards it and turned the handle without any preliminary knock, for nobody ever knocked at a door at Glockenau, and Ulrica had not yet learnt the usages of English society.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE 'FEW WEEKS.'

THE room which Ulrica thus incontinently invaded happened to be the dressing-room which adjoined Lady Nevyll's bedroom, and here her ladyship was spending the morning in the company of her maid, and of various assortments of patterns, and of a choice of fashion-plates which lay strewn in gay disorder over chairs and carpet. She was trying on a white lace cap with lilac ribbons before the mirror. 'I suppose it is quite impossible to wear lilac for a year,' she was saying, in a somewhat aggrieved tone, as Ulrica entered the room.

There was on both sides a pause of utter astonishment; Lady Nevyll rose from her chair with the cap still on her head, and the two women looked at each other during a moment of complete silence. What Ulrica saw was a fair-haired, faded woman, with an eager flush on her cheek, a fashion-plate in her hand, another lying at her feet, and in place of the widow's cap the white lace and lilac ribbons in her hair. What Charlotte, on her side, saw, was a shabbily dressed young girl, whose beauty burst upon her sight with a shock of surprise so great, that it struck her dumb for the moment.

It was thus that Ulrica and Charlotte first met; on both sides the impression was disagreeable. On Charlotte, this vision of youthfulness and strength, coming upon her so unexpectedly, had something of the effect of an overstrong light upon weak eyes. It was no thought of how their fates had been intertwined in the past which was here at work, for at this moment she had not even attempted to guess who Ulrica might be; neither was it any mystic presentiment as to the manner in which their fates were to be intertwined in the future, for mystic presentiments are not of nearly such frequent occurrence as a certain class of modern novelists would have us suppose: it was simply

that Ulrica's vivid beauty and magnificent vitality were almost overpowering to a woman of Charlotte's special constitution of mind. With her parted lips and the bright colour on her cheeks brought there by the brisk walk, she looked like the very personification of youth and health. Even the whiff of March air which she brought with her into the room, and even the splashes of mud on her village-made boots, served to accentuate the picture.

Ulrica was no less chilled by the sight of Charlotte than Charlotte had been by her first glance at Ulrica. Her very first thought, it is true, had been one of exultation. 'She can never have been half so beautiful as I am,' was what flashed through her mind, but indignation followed quickly. The scene brought back to her memory another scene in which she had played the part of actor instead of spectator: the day on which the landlady of the 'Golden Sun' had surprised her twining a red ribbon in her hair. It was for Gilbert that she had been making herself beautiful; for whom could Charlotte Nevyl be decking herself to-day?

'Are you my cousin Gilbert's widow?' she asked, after that pause.

There was such a strange reproach in the tone and in the questioning eyes fixed upon her, that Charlotte coloured uneasily.

'I don't quite understand,' she replied, in some confusion; 'are you then the cousin? Are you Countess Eldringen?'

'Yes, I am the cousin, I came last night.' She paused for a moment, and then added abruptly: 'Do widows in England not wear black?'

'Of course,' said Charlotte hurriedly, 'of course they wear black. This was only a—a rehearsal,' and she attempted to smile. Ulrica made no reply, but remained standing where she was, in a strong and obstinate silence.

'Will you let me show you the way to the drawing-room,' said Charlotte, with a nervous glance at the maid. 'We shall be quieter there.'

Ulrica was on the point of turning on her heel and leaving both the room and the house, but her curiosity with re-

gard to Gilbert's widow was not yet quite satisfied, so she silently followed Charlotte to the drawing-room.

'It was very kind of you to come so soon,' was the first obvious remark to make, and the one with which Charlotte broke the somewhat strained silence.

'I came here to-day meaning to condole with you,' answered Ulrica, with a bitterness which would not be repressed. 'I thought you might feel lonely and sad, but I see that I was mistaken.'

'Of course, I feel very lonely,' agreed Charlotte, 'especially since—' she had been going to say 'since last month,' but checked herself in time. She felt more at her ease now, since she was no longer so openly exposed to Ulrica's steady gaze.

'Were you not unhappy? Not even for a moment? Not even at first?' broke out Ulrica, straining for every sign on Charlotte's face. She was determined to know whether this woman felt absolutely nothing for Gilbert.

Charlotte raised her finely marked eyebrows. This young Austrian savage had a directness about her which certainly verged on the eccentric.

'Oh, of course,' she answered, with vague indifference, 'it has all been very sad. It was a most melancholy way to end.'

Ulrica made a quick gesture expressive of impatience.

'I suppose it does not take very long to get over the loss of a husband,' she remarked, still in that tone of ill-repressed bitterness. 'I cannot judge, of course, for I have never had a husband; but still, I should have thought it would take rather more than three months.'

'I daresay that partly depends upon what sort of a husband one has,' said Charlotte, with a sudden gleam in her blue eyes. After all, why should she be at the trouble of playing the comedy of the heart-broken widow before this distant cousin of her deceased husband? The whole world would very soon know of the happiness that was in store for her, so why trouble to keep on the irksome mask?

Ulrica got up quickly from her chair; she felt that she had learnt all that she wanted to know.

‘Are you going?’ asked Charlotte, in civil surprise. ‘You have only just sat down.’

Before Ulrica had time to answer the door was flung open and Mr. Dunnet, rather breathless and with his hair more on end than usual, was ushered in.

‘Thank Heaven, Countess! I could not imagine what had become of you. If it had not been for your having inquired the distance to the Old Hall, I should have had no clue. I was afraid you might have lost your way. I brought the brougham in case you should wish to drive home; but possibly the ladies have planned to spend the day together’—and he looked from one to the other.

‘No, we have planned nothing of the sort,’ answered Ulrica promptly. ‘I should like to go home at once, please.’

‘You came just at the right moment,’ she said to Mr. Dunnet when they were seated in the brougham, accompanying her words with an excited laugh, which greatly astonished the family lawyer. ‘If you had been a minute later, Lady Nevyl and I would have quarrelled hopelessly.’

And then she relapsed into silence, and no other word was spoken during the rest of the short drive. Mr. Dunnet was telling himself that this Austrian Countess, whom with such difficulty he had persuaded to come to England, might possibly be rather troublesome to manage now that she was here; and Ulrica, on her side, was deep in her own reflections. To think that if this woman had not been, there would have been no obstacle between Gilbert and herself! This woman, who had not one tear to spare for his memory, who held her widowhood in such light account—that widowhood of which Ulrica was so fiercely jealous—that she was already counting the days to the time when the rigours of *etiquette* would permit her to wear lilac ribbons. Lilac ribbons, indeed! It seemed to Ulrica that she must ever after hate that special shade of lilac. She was in a hard and bitter mood this morning. The pity she had been ready to give had not been wanted, and, being turned back upon itself, it had brought about the reaction of a violent dislike. It seemed so much

harder to have been robbed of Gilbert by a woman who made no pretence of even feeling his loss.

This first day at Morton, which had begun so strangely for Ulrica, flowed on evenly after the event of the morning, and yet every step which she took was in itself a strange and wonderful event.

When, after breakfast, Mr. Dunnet respectfully asked leave to conduct her through the house, it was in a state of awed stupefaction that Ulrica followed him from room to room, passing from an apartment that glowed in ruby plush and dull gilding to one that shone with sea-green brocade and Venetian crystal, mounting wide staircases and treading stately galleries that were hung with tapestries which a connoisseur would have recognised as being entirely unique and almost priceless, listening, without understanding them, to dissertations on the gems of statuary which here and there graced some cunningly devised niches, or on the paintings, ancient and modern, with which even the staircases were decorated with reckless profusion.

It was all too extraordinary to be true; it would have reminded Ulrica of something in a fairy tale, if she had ever been able to indulge in fairy tales as a child. As it was, it bewildered her so completely that of necessity it missed some of its effect. It was only when—the front regions being exploited—Mr. Dunnet led the way to the back premises that she was able to form something like an estimate of the wealth at her command. She understood nothing of statuary or of the relative value of 'old' and 'new' masters; but when Mr. Dunnet took her into a room which was lined with cupboards on whose shelves, as he told her, was piled linen to the value of two thousand pounds, when he showed her another which contained within its four walls china which had been estimated at more than five times that figure, then she began to see her way a little more clearly. These things presented distinct ideas to her mind. But it was the kitchen which put the crown to everything—such a kitchen, the vision of which, one would fancy, might tantalise a good housekeeper in a happy dream. Such rows of burnished coppers, such a battery of pans, such gradations of pudding moulds! And the long rows of

shelves, white as the driven snow. 'Why, it is as big, I believe, as the whole Marienhof together!' exclaimed Ulrica in genuine delight. It was impossible for any woman who had ever so much as boiled a potato or stirred a bowl of soup not to feel—to use a German expression—her heart laughing in her body at sight of that kitchen.

'And does all that, does everything in this house really belong to me?' she asked for the third or fourth time as they retraced their steps.

'Undoubtedly,' said Mr. Dunnet, unable to repress a smile.

'And these people, all these servants—do you mean that they will do what I tell them, that they will actually obey the orders I give them?'

'They are here for that sole purpose, Countess.'

'And can I have my eggs cooked every day in that delicious way they were cooked this morning? Will that man in the kitchen, that Frenchman with the white cap on, do them for me?'

'Of course he will, that is his business.'

'And if I wanted to drive out, for instance, do you mean that I could—'

'You would only have to touch the bell and order the carriage.'

'Then I have a carriage of my own?'

'You have nine different vehicles of your own, beginning with a drag and ending with a basket pony-carriage. You have only to say whether you want the brougham or the Victoria. I was just about to propose an adjournment to the stables, but perhaps you are tired?'

Ulrica was not tired, but she was too much dazed with the many things she had seen to feel inclined for any more to-day.

'I can go to the stables another day,' she said to Mr. Dunnet; 'there is time enough yet, I don't suppose I shall be starting back for at least a fortnight or three weeks.'

Mr. Dunnet made no reply, but silently inclined himself, perhaps partly for the purpose of hiding the smile which had again risen to his lips. His opportunities of studying human nature had been different from those of the landlady

of the 'Golden Sun,' and yet he believed as little as she did that the heiress would return to Glockenau in a few weeks.

It was during the afternoon of this same day that Ulrica, sitting alone in one of the drawing-rooms, and very much puzzled what to do with herself, heard a rustle of silk at the door, followed by a pause, a short cough, and then by a discreet knock. It was the same stately dame whom she had seen heading the line of female servants last night who now accepted her invitation to enter. She had been introduced to Ulrica as Mrs. Moore, the housekeeper.

Mrs. Moore had evidently got something on her mind. Despite the air of dignified resolution with which she rustled up to where Ulrica sat, she was not without some inward trepidation as to the result of what she was going to do, but no less determined to do it for the honor of the family, for Mrs. Moore had served the Nevyls almost as long as Mr. Dunnet.

'If I may be so free as to put a question, my lady,' she began, her mittened hands crossed decorously before her, 'are you expecting any further luggage from abroad? or is that box all that you have brought with you?'

'All I have brought with me?' repeated Ulrica, looking up from the album she had been listlessly examining. 'I should think so! Why, it is almost all I possess in the world. That is to say,' she corrected herself, glancing round her with a startled air at the plush furniture and Turkey carpets, 'all that I had till—till now.'

'Then, my lady,' pursued Mrs. Moore firmly, 'I am so bold as to remark that it is a pity to lose any time in ordering your new gowns. The one you have on just now—I take the liberty of saying it—is not exactly—well, not exactly the sort of gown in which the neighbourhood is accustomed to see the mistress of Morton Hall.'

Mrs. Moore drew a deep breath and rearranged the position of her mittened hands. She felt that her duty to the family was fulfilled, and there was nothing to do now but to await the result.

'My dress?' said Ulrica, looking down at her skirt in surprise. 'Is there anything wrong with it? Oh, I see,

that patch,' as her eye fell upon the square piece put in just hard by her right knee. She remembered now that during her inspection of the house in the forenoon she had been rather startled by coming upon her own image in a full-length mirror in one of the galleries. The patch at her knee had certainly looked rather incongruous reflected from that magnificent surface. She glanced now from her own dress to that of Mrs. Moore, and the absurdity of the situation forced itself upon her.

'Well, yes,' she said, 'I suppose I shall need a new dress. Is there any place near where I can buy some stuff? Is there a sewing-machine in the house? I could make it much quicker if I had a machine.'

'Surely, my lady, you would not be making it yourself?' gasped Mrs. Moore, flushing a deep scarlet from sheer astonishment.

'Why not? I made this one myself.'

'I suppose that was when—that is, during the time that your means were more limited,' said Mrs. Moore, somewhat embarrassed how delicately to express her meaning. 'But why should you trouble yourself with that now, my lady?'

Ulrica looked at her thoughtfully. What the house-keeper said was true. Why should she trouble herself now? Why should she prick her fingers and spoil her eyes over the threading of needles since she could pay other people to prick their fingers for her?

'But I don't know how to order a dress; I have never done so in my life,' she exclaimed. 'What ought I to do?'

'Why, my lady, you need only write a line to Madame Browne, who has made Lady Nevyll's dresses these last ten years, and she'll send down a dressmaker to take your measure by the next train; or it would be better still to telegraph.'

'But won't all that cost a terrible amount of money?' asked Ulrica, aghast.

Mrs. Moore looked at her new mistress steadily for a minute. 'Do you know, my lady, how much the late Lady Nevyll, that is, Sir Gilbert's mother, spent on her dress yearly? It was never less than three thousand

pounds, and she could have spent double as much as that without as much as feeling it.'

'Oh, well,' said Ulrica, with a short laugh, 'then I suppose I can afford the dressmaker.'

During the days that followed, it began by slow degrees to be borne in upon Ulrica's mind that she could afford not only the dressmaker, but also a variety of other things which until now had seemed to her as unattainable as castles in the clouds. It took her a little time entirely to realise the power she possessed. During the first week of her stay at Morton she had been so little acquainted with the use of bells and so much in the habit still of waiting on herself that the horrified domestics were more than once startled by the Countess appearing unannounced in the kitchen or the servants' hall, in quest of a glass of water or a clothes-brush. But during the second week already it began to afford her a strange, childish pleasure to test her new power by a variety of experiments, attempted at first almost timidly, but by degrees with a growing confidence.

At this time it not infrequently happened that Ulrica would ring up the footman or the butler, merely for the sake of convincing herself that her summons would actually be obeyed; and when she then ordered a fresh log to be put on the fire or a blind to be drawn up or down, she would stand by in speechless astonishment at seeing her request fulfilled on the instant, just as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Nothing is so terribly easy as the getting out of the habit of privation and discomfort and into the habit of bodily ease and luxury. It is as easy as slipping down hill, and very much pleasanter. Ulrica, moreover, had a certain aptitude for learning the lessons of riches, an instinctive appreciation of them which she had inherited, on her father's side, from a long line of ancestors. A mind laid out on such broad and simple lines as was hers must ever be chafed by the narrow restrictions of poverty, the petty manœuvrings which are necessary in order to induce the wolf to keep at a decent distance from the door. It was astonishing how quickly her first diffidence wore off; to

her somewhat imperious disposition, the giving of orders could not fail to come more easily than the taking of them, and before she had reigned a fortnight in her new kingdom, this girl, who a month ago had been scrubbing deal boards on her knees, found it quite natural that a liveried footman should stand behind her chair, and had even got over the shock of unbounded astonishment she had felt on seeing grapes and peaches on the table in March and hearing that they were grown in her own hot-houses.

'She *do* make queer mistakes,' commented the old butler in the servants' hall, 'but it's my opinion that she has a natural haptitude for being a lady, for all that she didn't seem to know what to do with her finger-glass till Mrs. Moore told her.'

Ulrica still told herself that she was certainly going back to Glockenau in a few weeks; but by degrees she began to concede that nothing but her own will bound her to those 'few weeks,' and that there was no reason whatever why they should not be expanded into a few months. There would come moments even when the idea of not going back at all would present itself to her mind as a possibility. Why should she return to hunger and cold after having tasted of better things, which by all the laws of right and common sense were hers, and hers alone? But as yet she had always put the thought angrily from her.

'It is *his* money. I cannot take it,' she would say between her set teeth. For amid the maze of new sensations which pressed in upon her on all sides, there was one thing which never wavered or changed or left her for a moment, the dull heartache which underlay every thought and feeling, and the bitter anger which would have stamped out that pain if it could, and which yet was itself an inseparable part of the pain. The surroundings were peculiarly suitable to keeping the wound fresh, and, perhaps for this very reason, Ulrica felt it growing daily more difficult to say good-bye to the place. At every step there was something that spoke of Gilbert: there was the room he had occupied, the horse he had ridden, some tree in the park he had planted; there were portraits of him in every stage of childhood and manhood; there was his nursery upstairs;

his name was forever in the mouths of the old servants of the family. And all these things served to keep alive not only her love, but also her anger, against the man of whom she was determined to believe that he had been false to her, and for whom yet all the time her heart was breaking.

Meanwhile the 'few weeks' and even the few months had passed, the trees in the park were green, the flower-beds in the garden were on fire with geraniums and calceolarias, and Ulrica told Mr. Dunnet that she did not think she would return to Austria before autumn. Mr. Dunnet highly approved, as also he highly approved of the directions she gave him one day with regard to the satisfying of her father's creditors. This last step seemed to him like a distinct concession, the first symptom that the heiress was beginning to abandon the position which she had hitherto so obstinately maintained.

But it needed something more in order to turn the scale. As yet, Ulrica had tasted only of the comforts which belong to wealth, scarcely yet of that sense of importance which is borne in upon the mind only by contact with the outer world. Above all, she knew nothing of that intoxicating power which beauty added to great riches infallibly brings to its owner. Hitherto she had shrunk from meeting strangers, and had flatly refused to receive all visitors. She could not in common decency avoid seeing Lady Nevyll occasionally, but the intercourse between the Old and the New Hall remained both languid and frigid. The accidental circumstances attending their first meeting had determined the groove in which their relations to each other were to run. On Charlotte's side, too, it could not be denied that a little unacknowledged grudge was at work. No woman ever enjoys giving up her place to another, even if she has hated being in that place before; and it lay in Charlotte's nature to turn from that which she possessed and to yearn for that which she had not. Since she was no longer the mistress of Morton Hall, she found the position ever so much more enviable than it had appeared to her while she held it.

How much longer Ulrica would have remained reduced to this scanty and unsatisfactory intercourse, it is hard to

say; but all at once Mrs. Byrd burst upon the scene, and immediately matters took another turn.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE 'MARSH.'

THE lion hunter had been away from home for some months, for she always managed to spend the season, or at any rate a respectable slice of it, in London, even though only in lodgings, and even though she had to turn and return her dinner-dresses year by year in order to meet the exigencies of the situation. London was her great hunting-ground, and the season was the hunting-time during which she generally collected celebrities enough to last her for the rest of the year. She had just come back now, dragging a French statesman and a Russian tragedian in tow, and with the prospect of a rising violinist to follow shortly; but her hunger was not yet appeased. Scarcely had she made her statesman and her tragedian as comfortable as the resources of Collingwood would permit, than she started off straight to Morton. This Austrian savage who had become the mistress of Morton Hall in such a truly sensational manner, and whose personality was still wrapped in a certain gloom of mystery, would be an invaluable addition to her collection.

'It's no use your going,' one of Mrs. Byrd's intimates said to her. 'She won't receive you. We've all been turned off at the door.'

'I shall not be turned off,' answered the lion hunter, with a gleam of desperate determination in her bottle-green eyes.

Even when met at the door by the information that Countess Eldringen was not at home, Mrs. Byrd was far from baffled. By a series of searching questions she dragged from the reluctant butler, who, though both by nature and training reticent, became helpless in her hands, all that she

required to know, viz., that in the first place the Countess was really and truly not at home, and in the second place that she had given the order to drive to Nevyl Bank, and that she therefore presumably was at this moment on the 'marsh.'

'To Nevyl Bank, then,' directed Mrs. Byrd, as she settled herself in the corner of the carriage. 'She can't escape me if she's on the marsh,' was her satisfied reflection. 'There's only one road that leads there, to begin with, and unless she lies down flat behind a bank, she can't hide from me once I'm there. Why, you can see a cat for half a mile off on the "marsh" almost as plainly as a cow.'

This was by no means the first afternoon that Ulrica was spending upon the part of the estate which was known as the 'marsh.' From the very beginning, when with Mr. Dunnet she had made the entire round of the Morton lands, this out-of-the-way corner had had for her a special fascination. It was a dull and uninteresting country they passed through on these excursions, flat turnip-fields, flat meadows, flatter roads. The farmhouses were built of the most uninteresting bricks; the barns were well stocked, but hideous to look at; the fences were in excellent repair, but yet to the eye a dreary substitute for flowering hedges. The 'marsh' alone had not yet been invaded by this atmosphere of prosperous conventionality. Its days indeed were numbered, like those of some untamed urchin who will presently have attained the school-going age, but who meanwhile is allowed to run wild at his will. In less than a year, most likely, the moment would have come for the final closing of the great earth-bank which had been begun three years ago, and by the erection of which the Morton estate would be the richer by eleven hundred acres of land successfully reclaimed from the sea. 'To him that hath shall be given'—no truer word has ever been uttered; and in order to make its truth more evident Fate had settled that the Morton estate, which in all conscience was big enough already, should by the gradual retreat of the waters in the estuary of the river Dibble, which here merged into the sea, be continually growing bigger.

The strangeness of the phenomenon, as well as the vast-

ness of the undertaking, had captivated Ulrica's fancy from the first. There was a certain element of excitement in this struggle, by which acre after acre was torn from the grasp of the greedy salt water, which to her nature was peculiarly congenial. She would stand by for hours watching the men at work upon the banks, and listening to the explanations given to her by the white-haired engineer, who had grown up, so to say, upon the Morton 'marsh,' and who with a sort of tender pride initiated her into all the mysteries of 'soak-ditches,' and 'gooters,' and 'training-walls.'

But it was not her interest in the work alone which drew her to the spot, it was the spot itself which had a special charm for her. Here there was an escape from the well-kept fences and well-manured fields, for here as yet there grew nothing but samphire and great tufts of bent-grass, except when in early summer the wide, flat surface was flushed rosy-red with delicate sea-pinks. Instead of the monotonous roads there were irregular winding cart-tracks, or the mere shadow of a foot-path trodden into being by the workmen, and washed out of sight by every high spring-tide which, entering between the sections of the sea-bank, still covered the surface of the half-reclaimed land. Here Ulrica loved to come when she felt in want of a change from the magnificence of Morton Hall. Here, with the salt air blowing in her face, with the sea-pinks shuddering near her on their stalks, and some stray sea-gull winging it wildly over her head, she felt stronger to fight down the pain which would sometimes clutch at her heart unawares. The long habit of hard work had made a certain amount of physical exertion an absolute necessity for her, and on the 'marsh' she could walk herself tired without ever having even to nod her head in return for some tenant's respectful salutation. If she did not happen to be in the mood for listening to the old engineer's endless dissertations on what had been the work of his life, she had only to avoid the corner where the workmen were busy about the bank in order to have the eleven hundred acres of salt-flavoured wilderness entirely to herself, or at most to share it with a few cows who splashed lazily through the greater

and lesser pools of sea-water which the last high tide had left standing stagnant among the patches of samphire and the tufts of rank grass.

When Mrs. Byrd reached Nevyll Bank, she proceeded to make inquiries. Nevyll Bank was nothing else than what fifty years ago had been the original coast-line, and though the tract immediately beyond it had been under cultivation for close upon twenty years, there was no possibility of confounding the old land and the land reclaimed. It was not only the abrupt fall of some twelve to fifteen feet in the level which so sharply defined the boundary, there were many other features more prominent still; for instance, the more absolute and, so to say, aggravated flatness of the surface, and the utter absence of trees beyond the old coast-line.

'Is the Countess on the "marsh" or not?' inquired Mrs. Byrd severely of the civil white-capped woman who appeared beside the carriage. Just where the road dipped down from the higher to the lower level there stood a small building, which was something between a farmhouse and an inn, and which did a good business in bacon and brandy supplied to the workmen on the 'marsh.' There existed a legend to the effect that some time or other in the 'thirties' a ship had been wrecked on this very spot of the then coast, and possibly for this reason, though there was no signboard to the inn, it was popularly designed by the cheerful epithet of the 'Dead Sailor's Home.'

The white-capped woman, who kept the 'Dead Sailor's Home,' having assured Mrs. Byrd that the Morton pony-carriage had not yet repassed the inn, that lady felt that she had successfully run her quarry to earth. The 'Dead Sailor' was virtually the key to the 'marsh'—there was no danger now of this newest of lions escaping her. The old tract of reclaimed land—a tract over which waves had once rolled, and where turnips now grew peacefully and oats luxuriantly nodded—was traversed at a brisk pace. At the end of the oat-fields there ran a high bank which marked the end of cultivation, and here Mrs. Byrd was further cheered by the sight of an elegantly appointed pony-carriage drawn up at the side of the road. Here

too, perforce, she had to leave her vehicle, for the road properly speaking came to an end, and on the other side of the bank, the green 'marsh' was still having it all its own way.

'There she is!' said Mrs. Byrd triumphantly, as she stood on the edge of the territory to be invaded, having swept her eye only once around over the verdant expanse. Mrs. Byrd had been right enough when she had argued that the 'marsh' was not the place in which to play hide-and-seek. Owing to the absence of anything higher than a tuft of grass, every moving object was not only clearly visible at a distance, but had a strange and weird knack of appearing about double its natural size. A cow that was cropping the grass beside the centre drain—a wide shallow canal cut to catch the superfluous sea-water—seemed to be as big as an elephant. Ulrica herself, whom Mrs. Byrd had espied standing on the flat top of one of the sections of the sea-bank, might have been taken for some colossal figure of stone, made several times larger than life.

'It will cost me a pair of boots,' reflected Mrs. Byrd, eying the pools of water mistrustfully, for the 'marsh' was more than usually marshy to-day, owing to an abnormally high spring-tide by which it had lately been visited; 'but I have not come all this way to be baffled in the end, so here goes!' And picking up her skirts, she boldly advanced. The *prestige* to be gained by being the first person who had actually interviewed the Austrian heiress was well worth a pair of boots.

Ulrica, standing immovable on the bank and staring out with throbbing brow over the wide expanse of bare sands which stretched out to the distant sea, remained unaware of the attack that was preparing. The wind which whistled past her ear would have deadened every other noise, even if the thick, soft grass had not muffled the sound of approaching footsteps. When she turned her head at last by chance, she was astonished to see an unknown lady carefully picking her way along, with her skirt held well out of reach of the damp, and already drawing close to the bank. Mrs. Byrd being in her best gown and with her 'visiting' bonnet on her head, the effect was so irresistible that Ulrica

broke into an uncontrollable laugh, upon which the visitor looked up and with the utmost good-humour joined in the expression of mirth.

'Yes, I suppose I do look rather comical,' she remarked, as she reached the bank and began the ascent somewhat breathlessly; 'and of course it is terribly unceremonious for a first call—absolutely shocking, some people would call it; but ceremonies never stop me when I have made up my mind to anything—just as little as puddles of water do—and I had made up my mind to see you to-day.'

'To see *me*?' repeated Ulrica, in astonishment. 'But I don't understand.'

'Of course not; you don't even know who I am. I am Mrs. Byrd, and I live at Collingwood. I only got down from town two days ago, and as I don't approve of near neighbours ignoring each other, I came to call on you to-day. I know you receive no visitors, but you see that I can manage to get myself received "whether or no." And now, of course, you can turn me out of the "marsh" if you choose, but I do hope you will let me get back my breath first. May I sit down for five minutes? This bank is the only dry spot for miles, I do believe.'

Ulrica regarded the little dingy-faced woman with a sort of puzzled amusement. She did not know what to make of her. In theory she would have resented the intrusion, but somehow it was not possible to take Mrs. Byrd seriously enough to feel very indignant with anything she ever did.

'I am afraid you have taken a great deal of trouble for no particular purpose,' she remarked.

'Oh, but I *have* a particular purpose,' responded Mrs. Byrd, who had partially recovered her breath. 'It was not only to make your acquaintance that I came; I want you to promise to come and see me, and if you do, I am rewarded for all my trouble.'

'I really don't see how that can be; you don't know me at all, you know nothing about me.'

'I know that you are the mistress of Morton Hall,' answered Mrs. Byrd, with a frankness which instinct told her would be her best policy in this case, 'and I see for myself

now that you are—' She broke off and fixed her keen little eyes in a sort of astonished stare on Ulrica's face.

'That I am what?' asked Ulrica, with a touch of impatience. But suddenly, Mrs. Byrd, starting up from the bank, on which she had scarcely sat down, seized both Ulrica's hands.

'My dear child, I cannot let you off, you must absolutely come!' she cried, in a burst of enthusiasm. 'I was prepared for your being good-looking—oh yes, Madge Farnley had seen you from a distance and spread the report; but this is a different thing altogether, I hadn't got my breath back enough to look at you properly till this minute. My dear child, I hope you don't mind my saying it, but do you know that there isn't a professional beauty in London at this moment who could show herself beside you?'

Ulrica smiled indifferently. There was a blunt good-nature about the tone of the remark which tempered its impertinence.

'You will come and stay a week at Collingwood, will you not?' pursued Mrs. Byrd, in an insinuating but determined voice. She was in the highest spirits. The idea of the heiress turning out to be a beauty as well! It doubled her value on the instant, at the same time that it fixed the lion hunter's resolve to a deadly and immovable purpose.

'But I have been nowhere—'

'So much the better; you will begin with me. You surely can't intend to cloister yourself at Morton for the rest of your life, with no other amusement than wandering about this dismal swamp? Why, it's enough to drive one melancholy mad! Please say that you will come. I am arranging a party for going to the Dartlands' garden *fête* on the 20th, and I have kept a place for you on purpose.'

'What is a garden *fête*? I suppose there will be a lot of people there, and I don't want to see people.'

'That is only your idea; wait till you have tried. The appetite comes in eating, as the French say. If you don't enjoy yourself, I promise never to invite you to anything again. So now, will you come?'

Ulrica stood uncertain. Perhaps there was something in what Mrs. Byrd said. Her life had been very empty

lately, her time hanging heavy on her hands, the luxury of idleness becoming almost oppressive. A few minutes ago, while she stood on the bank straining her eyes towards the sea, she had been wondering whether hard manual work were really the only means of killing thought and time; it was at any rate the only one she knew of. But now how would it be if she were to try this recipe of Mrs. Byrd's?

'But I am in mourning,' she said, hesitating, as she glanced down at her black dress.

'Yes, for a fourth cousin fifteen times removed, or something of that sort, and whom you probably never heard of until he was dead. As if six months' black was not doing the thing handsomely, as it is; and it's over the six months, for it happened in December, and we are in August now. Surely you don't mean to tell me that it's your mourning that is at the bottom of your hermit-like propensities? Nobody ever breaks their hearts *to* that degree for cousins *in* that degree.'

'Of course not,' said Ulrica, with a rather harsh laugh. 'Well, I will come, if you like, but I haven't the least idea what I am to do when I am there.'

Anything was better than running the risk of having her secret betrayed. It was annoying to think that the gossips of the neighbourhood were already on the lookout for the possible motive of her self-elected solitude. Ulrica began to tremble at the thought of their hitting upon the right one. She had been half inclined to say 'Yes' before, but it was the last remark, made quite at random by Mrs. Byrd, which had fixed her resolve.

By the time the two ladies had left the bank and traversed the marsh back to where the carriages stood, it had been satisfactorily settled that Ulrica was to drive over to Collingwood next day on a week's visit.

'Now, even if the violinist *does* play me false,' reflected Mrs. Byrd, as she turned her face homewards, 'I am richly provided for. Why, she is a host in herself. Nothing could fit in better; the whole world will see her with my party at the Dartlands' on the 20th, and the natural result will be a rush upon Collingwood. Oh no, I don't a bit mind having sacrificed these boots.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FIRST STEP.

THE Dartlands' garden-party, which came off punctually on August 20th, will be best described in the words of a young lady who chanced to be present, a certain Miss Kitty Milford, who does not appear in this story otherwise than as a spectator, but who was well known among her large acquaintance as possessing a ready pen, as well as what is generally called 'the gift of observation.' In a letter dated August 21, and addressed to an intimate girl friend, this is what Miss Milford wrote :

'DEAREST MOLLY: I verily believe that I was the last person to leave town this year, just as I usually am the first to go there; but here I am at last, fairly started on my autumn round, under my brother Hal's charge, and dying to tell you of the last most killing thing in the way of entertainments that I have just undergone. You must know that this is what is called a quiet and old-fashioned neighbourhood (for which read dull and dowdy), and a dinner-party is talked of in a prophetic vein a fortnight before it comes off and in a retrospective one a fortnight after it has come off. As for a ball, I suppose they would have to begin to think of it two years in advance. But what I have to tell you of was neither a dinner nor a ball, it was a garden-party, the first that has occurred for the last fifteen years, as far as I understand. It was meant as a sort of inaugural festivity, I imagine, for the Dartlands, who gave the party, have only quite recently come into the title, on the death of an unmarried uncle. You never saw such a couple of dreary swells in all your life. He can be best described as a walking protest against flippancy, the sort of man who always sits down soberly in the middle of his chair, always wipes his feet carefully on the door-mat, and never by any chance uses a word not to be found in Johnson. You feel that it would be an unspeakable relief if

only he would put his legs on the table, or run his fingers through his hair, or do anything to break the monotony of his oppressively good behaviour. She, poor woman, seems not only to have swallowed the unavoidable poker, but also, to judge from the angle of insane *hauteur* at which she considers it necessary to hold her head, it has evidently disagreed with her. Over both of them there yesterday lay a sort of tragic gloom; their new honours seem to have terrified them so completely out of their wits that it was impossible for any one with a sensitive heart not to feel some human pity. As Hal observed, it was all he could do to refrain from patting the poor man on the back and saying encouragingly: "Cheer up, old chap, you're not nearly so big a swell as you fancy yourself!"

'The tragic gloom, as tragic gloom has a way of doing, spread from the persons of the host and hostess, till it infected the whole concern. You could positively *feel* the dulness in the air. Nobody had a notion what to do with themselves. There were some pretty fair tennis-courts, but everybody was too well-dressed to think of playing tennis; and there were ices to eat, but people were all feeling so chilled to the heart by the atmosphere of semi-royalty which pervaded the entertainment, that I think hot negus or ginger wine would have had a better chance. One had a sort of feeling that if one attempted even the smallest bit of flirtation, some master of the ceremonies would start up at one's elbow and politely point out that such conduct was unfitted to the place. Somewhere about five o'clock some one started a report that there were goldfish to be seen in a pond on one of the terraces; you should have seen how we flocked towards that pond! It was quite touching to observe how even a hardened Londoner like myself can be reduced to a childish simplicity of mind under the pressure of a great and awful dulness.

'How, under ordinary circumstances, the afternoon would have been lived through, I cannot attempt to conjecture; but just as we were returning from the pond, having completely exhausted the subject of the goldfish, the great event of the day took place.

‘I think I gave you a description of Mrs. Byrd when I wrote from here about this time last year, so I need not go into details now. Well, just as we had torn ourselves away from the goldfish, Mrs. Byrd was seen arriving, with all her newest celebrities collected around her, like a sort of flock of chickens. There was a man all in shades of brown, yellow-brown skin, muddy-brown hair, chocolate-brown coat—a French minister of some sort, I believe; then there was Kulparow, the Russian tragedian, whom I saw as Hamlet this season, and who, by-the-bye, doesn’t look half so tragical in real life as Lord Dartland was looking yesterday; there was also some lesser lion, who either plays the violin or sails balloons or is the only survivor of a shipwreck, or at any rate has got himself talked about somehow or other; a member of some foreign nation, I presume, since he took away everybody’s breath by appearing in dress-clothes—no, I am not joking, it’s a naked fact; then there were a couple of other ordinary mortals, including Mr. Byrd, who belongs to the passive order of husbands, and then there was:

THE GREAT AUSTRIAN SAVAGE
NEWLY BROUGHT TO THIS COUNTRY.
TO BE SEEN AT THIS ESTABLISHMENT ONLY.

‘I am certain that is the way Mrs. Byrd would like to placard her newest acquisition, if she could have it all her own way. To make the placard “draw” better still, they should certainly be accompanied by a portrait, for, oh my dear, she is simply beautiful! That sort of clear, warm complexion which is like the skin of a peach, and eyes which surprise you by being grey instead of black when you see her close; and her figure simply perfect. When I tell you that though we were all in our best frocks and though she wasn’t dressed a bit properly for the occasion—a plain walking-dress pitch-forked right into the middle of muslins and laces and furbelows—and yet that she simply blotted us all out, you will be able to appreciate what I say. What she would be like if she were rigged out as she ought to be is almost rather bewildering to contem-

plate. Goodness, what a fuss they'll make about her if she goes to London next season! From the moment that she appeared on the scene the spell of dreariness seemed broken. Already the sight of the foreign lion's dress-coat had immensely raised our drooping spirits, but the dress-coat and the minister and the tragedian all vanished into thin air beside the heiress. (She's the girl, you know, who has suddenly come into a whole heap of money on the death of poor Sir Gilbert Nevyl, who was burnt to death in the Vienna theatre last year.) Nobody had seen her till then, and I fancy it must have been the proudest moment of Mrs. Byrd's life when she sailed up the path with this Austrian in tow. Of course she had come late on purpose to enhance the effect. And certainly one oughtn't to grudge the poor woman her triumphs, she works hard enough for them, in all conscience. People say that she is studying both Spanish and Turkish at present, as she has her eye upon a pensioned-off matadore and a disgraced Pasha for next winter; this, together with the amount of poetry she is obliged to read up and the new music she practices in order to be armed to meet the poets and composers who come to Collingwood, must keep her time pretty well occupied. But to return to the heiress. She completely swayed the situation. Whether her money alone would have produced this effect, or her good looks alone, I don't know, but certainly the two things together worked prodigiously. People who had managed to get introduced to her looked down with infinite contempt on people who had not. People who didn't know who she was were patronisingly informed by others as to the facts of the case. Every one of her movements was watched, and rather good fun it was, too. I don't suppose she had ever been at a garden-party before; not that she was shy or awkward or looked alarmed, but everything seemed to astonish her so much. I overheard her asking Madge Farnley why those *fishing-nets* were put up on the lawn, and once or twice she walked straight up to people whom she didn't know from Adam in order to ask some question or other, much of the same nature. But of course if you have eighty thousand a year it doesn't matter what you

do. I fancy that after she came the men enjoyed themselves on the whole better than the ladies did. For one thing, the conversation became painfully one-sided. You know of old that I have long ears on these occasions, and the scraps I picked up were sometimes rather interesting. "So *that* is the new mistress of Morton Hall?" some one said behind me in a meditative tone. "What an enviable man her husband will be!" It was a big, slightly ponderous man with a black moustache who made this remark, as I ascertained by squinting over my shoulder; I fancy I've seen him about town this last season. "Because of her face or because of her fortune?" asked his neighbour quizzically. There was no time for an answer, for just at that moment a sort of half-smothered shriek was heard, and Mrs. Byrd burst through the group and pounced upon the man with the black moustache. "You faithless creature!" she cried melodramatically. "What has become of your promises? How dare you show yourself in this part of the country without coming near Collingwood?" Some civil speeches followed; the big man explained that he had been able to get away sooner than he had calculated, etc., etc., and that since September had been fixed for his visit to Collingwood, and since Mrs. Tanner of Bromley had been particularly pressing in her reminders, etc. At this Mrs. Byrd glanced with a searching look towards where Mrs. Tanner was standing, almost as though she half suspected that lady of attempting to set up a rival establishment of lions. Then after a little more thrusting and parrying, the "faithless creature" was forgiven. "And now come and be introduced to my heiress," Mrs. Byrd wound up, relentingly. The proposal seemed exactly to meet the big man's wishes, for it was followed with alacrity, and after that he seemed to stick pretty close for the rest of the afternoon, as, to be sure, others did as well as he. I wonder what it feels like to be as rich and as lovely as that? Unless she is made of wood or of stone, it must have gone to her head just a little bit. I feel as if I could write pages on the subject, but as my candles evidently do *not* feel that they can burn on for hours more, I must hurriedly betake myself from my blotting-

book to my bed. And so good-bye, till I have another experience to report upon.

‘Yours ever,

‘KITTY MILFORD.’

On the same day that this letter was posted Ulrica wrote one to the landlady of the ‘Golden Sun’ at Glockenau, requesting her to pack up and forward to her all the personal belongings which she had left at the Marienhof, as she was not thinking of returning for the present. It was from Morton that she wrote, for Mrs. Byrd, despite her determination, had not been able to keep the heiress longer. The truth was that Ulrica was excited and restless; she felt the desire to be alone, and to try to analyse the new sensations which the last few days, and more especially the day of the garden-party, had awakened in her. At least she had *believed* that what she wanted was solitude, but to her surprise, once having got it, she did not relish it as she had expected. After the gay party at Collingwood Morton seemed strangely big and lonely, and after the admiration she had read in so many eyes on the day of her first real step into the world, it chilled her to be met only by the respectfully stony gaze of paid domestics. She had taken her first sip of that cup the delights of which so very few women are able to resist, and already the poison was at work in her veins, for Ulrica was not made either of wood or of stone. She felt that she wanted more of what she had had; more admiration, more of that intoxicating astonishment which had stood written on so many of the faces turned towards her; and why should she not have it, too? Why should she spend her days in mourning for a man who had deceived her? It was all false and hollow, she knew that well enough; there could be no truth in the world since even her cousin Gilbert had been false, but was that a reason for not enjoying the good things which this hollow world was able to offer? In the new recklessness which had taken possession of her, Ulrica decided that it was no reason whatever.

To spend the day thus alone was not possible; she felt she must speak to somebody about this her latest ex-

perience, and in default of any other hearer, Ulrica decided to walk over to the Old Hall and give Charlotte a description of the garden-party. Even Charlotte was better than nobody at all.

Charlotte was as much surprised at Ulrica's visit as at her manner; she had never heard her talk in so animated, almost excited a strain.

'I suppose you must have met almost all our neighbours,' said Charlotte, endeavouring to show some civil interest, for, truth to say, the conversation bored her considerably. Just before Ulrica came in she had been busied in making a calculation as to how many days would probably have to elapse before Basil might be expected to turn up again in the neighbourhood, for was not September now fast approaching?

'I suppose they were neighbours, but it was so confusing, I scarcely heard any names. But whether they were neighbours or not, they were all wonderfully amiable, much more amiable than anybody has ever been to me in my life before.'

'Oh, well, it is to be expected that you should attract attention now,' said Charlotte, in the tone of a grudging admission. 'You will be what people call a *parti*.'

'What does that mean?'

'That means,' said Charlotte, with a smile that was almost insolent, 'that whoever marries you will think he has won a great prize. Have you not yet found out what an influence money has upon men?'

'How she says that!' thought Ulrica, her eyes fixed in silent anger on Charlotte's face; 'just as though she herself had not married Gilbert for money alone, and thus wrecked his life and mine!'

The conversation was taking place out-of-doors, for the afternoon was still and warm, and it was in a basket chair on the lawn that Ulrica had found Charlotte installed. From where they sat nothing but a corner of the Old Hall was visible, close at hand yet veiled by the intervening trees.

'What is it? Why are you looking at me so?' asked Charlotte, disturbed by Ulrica's gaze and her silence.

‘Nothing. I was thinking that very likely you are right about money and men; I had one to hold my cup and another to hold my parasol, and I daresay I might have had another for my saucer and another for my tea-spoon as well.’

‘Young men are so foolish,’ drawled Charlotte, languidly.

‘Oh, it wasn’t the young men alone,’ said Ulrica, with a reckless laugh; ‘there was one quite dignified looking gentleman, not at all so very young, who was almost the most eager among my serving-knights. He not only held both my cup and saucer for me, but he explained to me all about that game that you play with the nets on the grass, and when I said I should like to try it, he gave me a lesson, and we two had a game all alone, though nobody else was playing.’

‘And who was this middle-aged Adonis who made himself so conspicuous?’

‘Oh, I haven’t an idea, I told you that I didn’t remember any names. Are those not wheels on the gravel? Are you expecting any visitors?’

‘No, I am expecting no one—yet,’ said Charlotte, turning her head, nevertheless, in the direction of the house. The next minute a gentleman appeared from among the trees and crossed the lawn towards the encampment on the grass.

‘So my ears have not deceived me,’ was his greeting as he approached. ‘I thought I heard voices in this direction.’

Charlotte had risen hastily from her chair, her eyes all delight, a sudden flush upon her face. She made a step towards her visitor.

‘Welcome back!’ she said, with hand outstretched. ‘This is sooner even than I had looked for.’

He took the hand, but glanced past her towards the second lady present. Charlotte felt herself recalled to her duties of hostess.

‘This is Countess Eldringen, my cousin,’ she said, turning. ‘Allow me to introduce Mr. Rockingham.’ It was with a certain triumphant ring in her voice that she pronounced the name; the tone distinctly betrayed the pride of possession.

‘I have had that pleasure already,’ responded Mr. Rockingham, with a smile that was even more suave than usual.

‘Already?’ repeated Charlotte, looking from one to the other in blank surprise. ‘When did you—’

‘We met at Lord Dartland’s garden-party—and oh, by-the-bye, Countess, I hope you did not feel very stiff after your first tennis-lesson? It was rather hard work in that sun.’

‘Hard work?’ said Ulrica, with a laugh. ‘Is that your idea of hard work? It is not what I have been accustomed to call hard work. How funny that we should just have been talking about it before you appeared.’

But Charlotte was no longer listening. With hands tightly clasped together, she stood by and stared incredulously, yet with a growing terror in her eyes, at Basil standing by Ulrica’s side and talking to Ulrica. In one single instant she seemed to read what the future must bring, must inevitably bring. It was no presentiment that came to her aid, her vision was sharpened only by her intimate knowledge of the material with which she had to deal. What Basil wanted was not so much a wife as an ambassador. He was susceptible to female loveliness, and Ulrica was beautiful, far, far more beautiful than Charlotte had ever been; he could never have enough of riches, and Ulrica was rich, ten and twenty times richer than Charlotte. Oh yes, she saw it all quite clearly now. What had she been about, in Heaven’s name, what had she been about not to foresee that this must come? Why had she not taken her precautions while there was yet time? Why had she not so arranged matters that the meeting should take place in London, in Bournemouth, anywhere but here?

It was a short agony that Charlotte lived through, while she stood by with thin lips compressed and hands tightly clasped, while beside her Ulrica and Mr. Rockingham were exchanging their impressions of the great garden-party.

Fool, fool that she had been not to have flown from this danger!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WIDOW'S CAP.

ONCE more Mr. Rockingham was standing on the hearth-rug of his bedroom at Collingwood, his feet well apart, his back to the fire, as, with bent head and eyebrows contracted, he communed confidentially with his slippers. Almost a month had passed since the Dartland garden-party, and the damp September weather made a fire very grateful to the ex-Minister, whom long residence in foreign countries had rendered chilly. His face bore an expression which was triumphant and yet a trifle disturbed.

To Mrs. Byrd's deep regret, Mr. Rockingham was leaving Collingwood next day. On the table there lay an open telegram in which he was informed that his appointment to the post towards which he had been working his way during the last year had just taken place. He must be in London next day, and within a week he would probably have sailed from England. His first idea had been to start by the morning train, but a little reflection had decided him in favour of the night mail; he would thus gain the afternoon for some purposes of his own.

According to the programme he had made in spring, this would have been the moment to hurry up matters with Charlotte, but it was not of Charlotte that he was thinking as he stood on the hearthrug and reviewed the situation.

'There can be no doubt,' he remarked to his slippers, 'that there is ever so much more in this idea than there ever was in the other. Good Lord! what eyes she has got! I saw nothing to come near them either in Greece or Spain.' And for a moment he fell into something that might almost have been called a *reverie*.

Presently, with an impatient shake, he raised his head.

'Eyes, indeed. If she had no more solid advantages than her eyes, poor Chatty might yet have been happy. Let's come to business, Mr. Rockingham. But I must be cautious; too much haste might spoil everything. All that

can be done for the present will be to part on the amiable and unobtrusive terms of master and pupil, to shake hands over the tennis-net, figuratively speaking. Then, if she can only be brought to London in spring, brought to London heart-whole, my way will be pretty clear. Among the host of strange faces mine will appear almost like that of an old friend. Yes, it must certainly be London, if only for the sake of being out of Charlotte's way. *Hi*, what say you, *Monsieur le diplomate*, is not that neatly planned?' and Mr. Rockingham dug his hands still deeper into his pockets, drew his shoulders up to his ears, and smiled radiantly at his slippers.

In accordance with this newly revised programme he drove over to Morton early on the following afternoon, having left orders for his portmanteau to be packed. The Old Hall had to be visited first; he could not well avoid taking leave of Charlotte, and, in fact, it was only under cover of the Old Hall that the New Hall could be ventured on at all.

Charlotte was at home, occupied in reading a society paper. She folded it up hastily and pushed it aside as he entered. In the column of fashionable gossip she had just been annoyed by the discovery of a paragraph which confided to the world at large that there were very good grounds for believing that the widow of a certain unfortunate baronet who had perished last year in a most tragical manner would shortly unite her lot with that of 'one of our most able diplomats.'

Mr. Rockingham's return to the neighbourhood, coupled with his calls at Morton in spring, had evidently appeared conclusive to the gossip-collectors of the *Spy*. Six months ago the paragraph would have thrilled Charlotte with delight; just now it seemed only to accentuate her defeat. And yet, by the way she changed colour when told of the object of his visit, Basil could see that even now hope was not quite dead within her. The perception of this fact moved him to curtail to a minimum the length of his call, for cruelty did not lie in his nature.

When he rose to go she rose as well, and stood for a moment undecided before she put out her hand.

'You are going to the New Hall now?' she asked quickly and suspiciously.

'Yes. Have you any message?'

'I have no message, but I—I was thinking of going over this afternoon,' stammered Charlotte, 'and perhaps you wouldn't mind my driving over with you, as I haven't given orders yet about the carriage?'

Mr. Rockingham, with all his diplomacy, could do nothing but bow acquiescence.

To Charlotte this was a respite. At least she would be able to assure herself with her own eyes of the exact sort of parting that took place between Basil and Ulrica.

Certainly it would be infinitely more convenient to meet Ulrica in London, reflected Mr. Rockingham as he followed Lady Nevyll down the staircase; it also would be kinder to Charlotte, for whom he really and truly felt very sorry. 'She has no luck, poor thing,' he said to himself quite compassionately.

By an odd coincidence Ulrica's attention also had been on this same day arrested by the same paragraph which had so much annoyed Charlotte; for, amongst other accomplishments, she had already acquired that of filling up her too ample leisure with the perusal of society papers. Even to her inexperience the 'widow of the unfortunate baronet' was immediately recognised as Charlotte, but it had not yet occurred to her to identify the 'able diplomat' with her new acquaintance who had been so obliging about the tennis, but to whom she had only spoken four times in all.

To Ulrica the paragraph had brought an increase of indignation against Gilbert's widow. What! Her cousin had not been dead a year, and already the name of his successor was in the mouths of the gossips. Not content with not having loved him, she was going to flaunt this fact in the face of the world.

It was with an even less friendly mien than usual that she rose from her place on hearing Lady Nevyll announced.

'So my tennis-lessons are at an end for the present,' was the remark she made when Mr. Rockingham had an-

nounced his impending departure. Though Charlotte watched carefully for any sign of emotion, she grew none the wiser from the expression on Ulrica's face. Ulrica, in point of fact, was not thinking of Mr. Rockingham at all, but of that unknown 'able diplomat,' who as yet was but an abstraction to her.

'They will be superseded, I presume, by dancing-lessons,' Mr. Rockingham hastened to say.

'Dancing? What for? Somebody told me that the last ball in this neighbourhood took place exactly five years ago.'

Mr. Rockingham gently shrugged his shoulders. 'No doubt; but who is talking of this neighbourhood? I take for granted that London will be our next meeting ground.'

'Oh, but Countess Eldringen is not thinking of going to London,' quickly interpolated Charlotte. 'She is not used to seeing so many people.' Already she had pierced the motive of Basil's remark, and had guessed at the programme sketched out on the hearthrug last night.

'There is no reason why I should not get used to seeing people,' Ulrica impatiently retorted, merely for the pleasure of contradicting Charlotte.

'Ah, that sounds a little better,' agreed Mr. Rockingham approvingly. 'If only I had my six weeks' leave in my pocket I should feel emboldened to petition for the first waltz at the first ball at which we meet.'

'A London season is terribly fatiguing,' persisted Charlotte, with feverish eagerness.

'It would take a good deal to fatigue me,' laughed Ulrica, somewhat surprised at the evident anxiety in Charlotte's tone.

Charlotte turned to Mr. Rockingham.

'But is it dignified for an ambassador to waltz?' she asked, with an effort at playfulness which, owing to the unsteadiness of her voice, was a lamentable failure.

'Under so great a temptation even an ambassador must succumb,' responded Mr. Rockingham, with a slightly pompous bow in Ulrica's direction.

The colour left Charlotte's face. A feeling of utter helplessness came over her; try as she would she could

not stem the current of events. 'O Basil,' she murmured under the pressure of her excitement. She was not aware that she had said it, but Ulrica, who sat close by, heard the words and looked up just in time to see the reproachful gaze which Charlotte turned on her faithless lover. There was no possibility of misinterpreting that look. Suddenly an idea struck Ulrica: Mr. Rockingham was an ambassador, and ambassadors are diplomats—even Ulrica knew that. She took another look at Charlotte's face and she began to understand. This, then, was the man of whom the widow had been thinking as she decked herself with the lace cap and the lilac ribbons. Involuntarily her teeth closed more tightly, and about her beautiful mouth there appeared hard, cruel lines.

'I suppose it will end by my going to London,' she remarked, after a moment, deliberately; 'there seems to be no escape for me, at least everybody tells me so, so you can make a note of that waltz, if you don't mind playing the dancing-master as well as the tennis-master.'

Five minutes after she had said it she had forgotten her own words; but into Charlotte's mind the careless phrase had sunk straight and deep, like a weight of lead.

'It was only to be expected, it cannot be otherwise,' she sobbed to herself that evening in the room. 'He is twenty years and more older than she is, of course, but then his looks are so perfectly preserved.'

There existed no doubt whatever in Charlotte's mind that Basil had already made an impression on the heiress; she found it unavoidable that it should be so, considering how irresistible Basil was, but it only made her own position more hopeless.

It was only a few days later that Charlotte came very near to making a discovery which would have shown her in one instant how false her surmise was.

Ulrica had been informed that Lady Nevyll was confined to her room with a headache, and partly because she had nothing else to do, partly, also, moved by some impulse of pity, she had walked over to the Old Hall. Charlotte was lying motionless on a sofa in her bedroom. She was scarcely to be recognised as the same woman who had

astonished Mr. Rockingham so much on the occasion of the meeting on the church steps; that brief period of glory was over; she had collapsed again into her former self. Even her dress betrayed the reaction, and already the slovenliness and indifference were beginning to creep into the very twist of the bows on her cashmere dressing-gown.

'I wonder you can breathe in this room,' said Ulrica in a not particularly sympathetic tone; 'why, it's almost like being inside an eau-de-Cologne bottle. Positively you must let me open at least one window-pane.' Without waiting for Charlotte's murmur of resigned acquiescence she went to the window and opened it. Passing by the toilet-table she stood still, her attention arrested by an object which lay there.

'You have quite given up wearing this, have you not?' she asked in a hard, dry voice, holding up something white as she spoke.

'Wearing what? My cap? Oh yes, long ago. I was sorting out some useless things this morning when my head got so bad, that is why there is such a litter on the table there.'

Ulrica's fingers trembled a little as she held the discarded widow's cap in her hands. Very often during the earliest days of her stay in England she had looked at that cap with envious eyes as it crowned Charlotte's pale golden hair. Often, very often, had she felt the wild desire to tear it from her rival's head, as one queen might seek to uncrown another queen, and to call out to her in disdain:

'*Mine* is the right to wear it, for it is *I* who am his rightful widow and not you.'

'I wonder how it would suit me?' she said aloud, with a little catch in her voice which might possibly have been meant for a laugh.

'It suits nobody,' said Charlotte querulously.

Ulrica did not answer; with the widow's cap on her head she was bending forward and drinking in her own image in the glass.

Oh, for the right to wear it in the eyes of the world! For a full minute she gazed, then reluctantly put up her hand to remove it; but just then her eye fell on an open

trinket-case which stood on the table amongst a heap of black crapes and laces. In the upper tray, embedded in blue velvet, lay a small oval miniature in ivory, set in a narrow gold rim. Ulrica remained standing motionless, her eyes fixed on the exquisitely executed painting. It was the portrait of a child, of a boy not more than fifteen years of age, but Ulrica had seen those eyes in the face of a man—she could not be mistaken. Was this also one of the 'useless things' about to be discarded?

'Who is it?' she asked in a breathless whisper. 'This miniature, who is it?'

'Oh, that? It is a portrait of my husband. He gave it me when we were engaged to be married.'

'It is very like him,' Ulrica said quickly, the tears starting suddenly to her eyes. Amongst all the pictures she had seen of him none had so vividly brought back to her memory Gilbert's glance and Gilbert's smile as this boyish likeness executed by a master-hand.

'Did you know him?' asked Charlotte in languid surprise.

Ulrica had repented of her words almost before they were spoken. Hitherto she had succeeded in concealing the fact of her acquaintance with Gilbert.

'I met him once in Austria,' she said quietly, though her heart was beating with unbearable haste. 'It was when he had come abroad to shoot chamois, I think.'

'Really? I don't think you ever mentioned the fact before.' Charlotte spoke without any interest. She had never taken any interest in her husband's acquaintances, and there was nothing astonishing whatever in his having come across Ulrica in Austria.

'He was very fond of chamois-shooting, was he not?' said Ulrica, by way of saying something.

'I believe so; at any rate it was as good an excuse as any other for getting away from England.'

It was during these minutes that Ulrica's secret trembled in the balance. Though by a supreme effort of self-control she had succeeded in steadying her voice, she was not able to control her rising colour, nor could the whole strength of her stubborn pride crush down the tears that had started

to her eyes. If Charlotte, instead of holding her hand over her aching eyelids, had but chanced to glance up as she made the remark, she could not have failed—being a woman—to read in Ulrica's face as in an open book. By the trembling of her lips, by the two bright drops that were stealing over her burning cheeks, even by the nervous gesture with which she put up her hand to pull off the widow's cap, Ulrica would have stood confessed under Charlotte's glance. One casual lifting of the eyes, it wanted but that to chase from the elder woman's mind the false belief which had taken possession of it, and to put her on the track of a discovery which would, without doubt, have lightened the greater half of her anxieties. On such a slender thread as this does the crisis of a life sometimes hang.

As winter first approached and then advanced, Ulrica and Charlotte saw less and less of each other, for Charlotte shut herself once more up in the Old Hall, and Ulrica seldom spent more than a week at a time at Morton. So heavily did solitude begin to weigh that she accepted every neighbourly invitation which reached her. To her inexperience even the dullest and most pompous dinner-party was full of unexplored wonders.

By this time it was a settled point that she was going to London in spring. It had been nothing but a spirit of contradiction that had first moved her to consider the question, but by degrees she had got interested in the idea and now looked forward to the dawn of the season with a sort of uneasy impatience. Mrs. Byrd was more impatient still, for by judiciously playing her cards she had succeeded in securing for herself the comfortable berth of Ulrica's chaperon. The idea of being 'chaperoned' by this little stumpy woman, or indeed by any one in the world, struck Ulrica as being in grimly humourous contrast to her former experiences; but a guide of some sort would doubtless be useful in the unknown world she was about to enter.

There was one other person besides Charlotte who disapproved of the London plan, and that one was Mr. Bolt, the old farmer-engineer who superintended the works on the 'marsh.' With Ulrica's departure he would lose the one sympathetic listener he had ever had, for neither Sir Gil-

bert nor Sir Gilbert's father, under whom he had held a contract, had ever shown much interest in the works. Once started upon his solitary theme, he could talk by the hour. By dint of studying this one spot of earth during forty years, under every aspect, at every hour and in all weathers, he had come to discover beauties about it which to another eye would have been invisible. His whole heart was wrapped up in this 'marsh,' it clung around every spray of samphire and every tuft of sea-pink that bloomed on the wide surface, and it lay buried in every pool of salt water that glistened between the clumps of bent grass.

'But if you are going to London, miss, you won't be here for the closing of the bank,' was the remark he made, with a face of almost comical consternation, when one day late in March Ulrica had announced her impending departure. 'I had counted for certain on your being here.'

'Yes, to be sure. I had forgotten about the bank,' said Ulrica. 'When do you think you will close it?'

'Last neap-tide in June, as near as I can say. It will take us quite the week to be ready for the spring tide, and unless it finds all the fourteen openings shut up we are done for. This one here will be one of our hardest tussles;' and the engineer, who was standing beside Ulrica on one of the sections of the bank, indicated the gap which extended to within a few paces of the spot. 'The narrower the gap, the deeper the gutter, that's the general rule.'

What Mr. Bolt designated by the unpoetical name of 'gutter' was in reality the flood hollow or natural channel worn out by the rush of the waves between the two sections of bank. At this moment the tide was in retreat, and the expanse of sands which stretched seawards was bare and glistening, but in the deep scoop of the flood hollow, which ran to more than a hundred yards outside the line of the bank, the water stood to a depth of eight or ten feet. It was a miniature green lake on which Ulrica looked down, and as on the edge of a lake a couple of big, clumsy fishing-boats reposed, ready to float again with the turn of the tide.

'The job will cost me seven sleepless nights,' said Mr.

Bolt, with a sigh. 'And to think, miss, that you won't see the last spadeful put on, after all!'

'Well,' laughed Ulrica, as she turned to descend the bank, 'the last spadeful is not put on yet. There is no saying whether I may not be tired of London by June. In any case be sure you let me know when the date is finally fixed.'

'I shall do that without fail,' said Mr. Bolt, his weather-beaten old face lighting up at the hope held out, even though it was but a faint one.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE EDGE OF THE WHIRLPOOL.

EVERYBODY knows that London is a very ugly place. It would be absurd to deny that of all the capitals of Europe it is the grimmest, sootiest, smokiest conglomeration of bricks and mortar on which the sun shines, or far more often does not shine. All the more praiseworthy, therefore, is the achievement by which London annually succeeds in becoming almost beautiful during three whole months. Other towns rely upon their climate or their situation, upon their architecture or the magnificence of their streets, and disdain all minor attempts at beautification, but London, knowing well that it has none of these things to boast of, strains every nerve to welcome its guests with a smiling face. Possibly this is the secret of that dazzling, if short-lived, brilliancy which once a year manages to put even Paris and Vienna in the shade. Granted that London, even on a bright winter's day, is considerably drearier than Vienna on a dull one; but when those ugly brick fronts bloom out suddenly with crocuses and hyacinths, when the wonderful English grass flashes into emerald in the parks, when the horsemen and women begin to gather in the Row, and visions of dainty loveliness are to be caught by the passers-by through the panes of every carriage window,

when everybody is in their best clothes and their best spirits (as people always are who are determined to enjoy themselves), every horse groomed, every hat brushed, and every bit of brass or plate burnished to the pitch of perfection—in one word, when every available pound, shilling, or penny scraped together during the rest of the year has been dragged to London by its owner for the sole purpose of being spent, then who would exchange our capital for any other in the world?

Ulrica had been more than a fortnight in town without being able to recover from her bewilderment. Why, Vienna was nothing to this; beside Hyde Park the *Prater* was a desert, and compared to the din of Regent Street an idyllic peace might be said to reign on the *Ring Strasse*. After the deep repose of Glockenau, followed by the scarcely less deep solitude of Morton, the plunge into this seething centre of life was all the more amazing. On the day after her arrival she had surprised Mrs. Byrd by springing up and going to the window every time that wheels were heard rolling down the street, under the vague impression that every carriage meant a visitor. She very soon gave it up, having come to the conclusion that in order to control the movements of every vehicle that passed the door she would require to spend the entire day at the window.

This fortnight had been devoted chiefly to shopping, consultations with dressmakers, and a certain amount of dining out. London was at its very best, not yet full, but filling rapidly; it was the moment when leaves have not yet had time to get grimy, and hopes have not yet had time to get dashed. Ulrica had been to the theatre, she had driven in the Park, and she had made what appeared to her a countless number of new acquaintances, though Mrs. Byrd declared that as yet she knew 'simply nobody.' And in a certain sense Mrs. Byrd was right. Though Ulrica had gone through several dozen introductions, she still, from a fashionable point of view, knew nobody, and more emphatically still, she was not known. A good many glasses had been directed towards the box in which she sat, and a good many heads had been turned in the Row to gaze after this

new beauty, and already the report of her beauty and of her wealth was beginning to spread from circle to circle; but as yet London at large had not discovered her, for London is too vast and too opaque to be pierced in one instant by the radiance of any single star, however bright.

‘You have seen nothing yet,’ said Mrs. Byrd to the wondering Ulrica, ‘and you have not been seen. It requires a big ball to make a start.’

‘You don’t mean to say that you are giddy already,’ remarked her neighbour at dinner one evening towards the end of her first fortnight in London. ‘This is only the edge of the whirlpool; wait till you are whisked into the middle.’

It was a more than elderly Marquis who made this remark. Ulrica had met him for the first time that evening, and before dinner was half over had decided that Lord Cannington was by far the most amusing of all the acquaintances she had made since she had come to town. With his dried-up features, bushy eyebrows surmounting a pair of restlessly moving eyes, pointed grey moustache, and grimly saturnine smile, he was not at all unlike an exceedingly gentlemanlike, somewhat dignified elderly devil; and his conversation rather deepened this impression than detracted from it.

‘Your first season, I am told,’ was the remark with which he opened conversation in a dry, abrupt voice. ‘Humph, I’ve heard of you already.’

‘From whom?’ asked Ulrica, in some surprise.

‘From whom? From whom?’ repeated Lord Cannington, with a touch of testiness. ‘How do I know from whom? Those sort of things lie in the air, one inhales them along with the soot and the scent of the roast truffles. You don’t suppose, do you, that an heiress of your—what shall I call it?—calibre—appears in London every season? And with your looks into the bargain. I’m old enough to be your grandfather, so there’s no harm in plain English. You mayn’t know it, but you’re a phenomenon. Where have you been to as yet?’

‘Mrs. Byrd says I have been nowhere,’ answered Ulrica, who was beginning to feel entertained, ‘but I am going to my first ball to-morrow.’

‘Humph, white gown, snowdrops, and all the rest of it, I suppose; I know the style of thing—one of the troop of dove-like *débutantes*; can’t say *bo* to a goose—in public, that’s to say; as to what they say to the geese in private, of course I have no means of judging, but I fancy it’s a good deal more than *bo*.’

‘You are either very rude or a very stern moralist; I can’t quite make out which,’ said Ulrica, laughing.

Her new acquaintance looked at her for a moment out of the corners of his eyes.

‘My fair young friend,’ he presently observed, ‘I believe that I started in life endowed with—or, more correctly speaking, hampered by—a fair portion of what some people are pleased to call moral sense, and not entirely free from what other people like to call feelings, but I’ve lived for sixty-five years,—in London, mostly,—and both those appendages are worn pretty threadbare by this time, thank Heaven.’

‘Why thank Heaven?’ asked Ulrica, rather startled.

‘Do you want to have a good time of it?’ retorted her companion. ‘Do you want to enjoy your life in general and this season in particular?’

‘Of course I do, but—’

‘Then take my advice and start with your eyes open. Don’t put on the white dress with the snowdrops, for nobody will believe in it, and don’t believe in the other snowdrops you see. Don’t float into life wrapped up in misty illusions which will blind you so that you will stumble at every step, but have the courage to look where you are treading, and then put your foot down boldly; I believe you’ve got the stuff in you to do it. In spite of that first ball you’re no baby, either in years or in experience; it’s written in your face. Don’t imagine that there is any such thing as disinterested love in the world, or a friendship that is not to be bribed, or an opinion that is not to be bought—’

‘But what then remains?’ asked Ulrica, aghast.

‘What remains? Why, everything remains that is worth living for. English comfort remains, and continental merrymaking, and good cookery, and well-warmed claret, and

chairs that are cushioned to a nicety, and carriages that roll easily, and well-lighted rooms, and the power of beauty and of money—all *that* remains. It's a fallacy to imagine that these things do not content the human heart,—it's only those people who haven't got the money to buy them who say they don't, and it's only those fools who look for virtue in a ball-room or heroism on the tennis-ground, who ever get disgusted with their bargain. As if every educated person nowadays did not know that virtue depends on a mixture of the blood, and that heroism is determined by the formation of the skull. Start with your eyes open, that is what I say.'

The old Marquis spoke without any trace of excitement, and without the slightest flavour of bitterness, as comfortably and as pleasantly as though he were discussing the last new drama or criticising the latest fashions. There was no more passion about him than about an extinct volcano. Ulrica listened almost in consternation. What a terribly convenient doctrine this would be if it were true!

'So the upshot of your teaching is that I am to throw all my beliefs overboard?'

'Make a clean sweep of them at once, that's my advice. It's what I've done myself, and you can't imagine how well it agrees with me. Believing in anything or anybody is a sort of illness one has got to go through in tender years, like measles; it does you no harm then, but, if you catch the infection when you are old, you generally die of it. Bless your heart, there was no end to the things I used to believe in when I was your age and under; I remember a time when I firmly believed that *I* should go to Heaven in a fiery chariot, and now I don't even believe that Elijah ever went.'

'Your theory agrees with you, at any rate,' remarked Ulrica reflectively; 'you positively look as if you hadn't a care in the world. I wonder if it would agree with me as well. Do you know that you have rather tickled my fancy—I also have had beliefs, and they also have failed me. What would you say to me as a disciple?'

'I have answered that question already; I said from the first that you do not belong to the ordinary genus *débutante*.

I'll take you for a disciple if you'll take me for your guide, philosopher, and friend in the labyrinthine ways in which you are about to tread.'

'All right,' laughed Ulrica, sipping her champagne. 'The compact is closed.'

It was on the day after this dinner-party, on the day of the ball at the Russian Embassy, to which Mrs. Byrd had succeeded in getting invitations for herself and Ulrica, that Charlotte turned up in London, unannounced and unexpected. She had suddenly discovered that she had some very urgent shopping to do, she explained, and since there were so many empty rooms in Park Lane, she had thought that Ulrica might, perhaps, not object, etc., and since the shopping really was very urgent, she had not taken time to write and inquire, etc., etc.

Ulrica received her with a blank stare; whatever brought Charlotte to London it was glaringly evident that shopping had nothing to do with it. 'So you are quite determined to go to the Russian Embassy this evening?' she inquired in the course of the afternoon, though she had already heard the order for the carriage given and had seen Ulrica's dress lying ready on the bed.

'Certainly I am,' said Ulrica in surprise. 'It isn't such a desperate resolve either, so far as I can see.'

'I only meant,' faltered Charlotte, 'that I—I thought you looked tired, and it will be a terrible crush, I imagine—it always is.'

'Dear me,' laughed Ulrica, with a touch of impertinence, 'you almost look as though you regretted the chance of being in the crush yourself!'

'I? Oh, well, I didn't mean that exactly—that is to say—I suppose you have made a great many new acquaintances?' she abruptly inquired.

'Oh yes, lots; that's what I came for.'

'And,' asked Charlotte, her eyes fixed watchfully on Ulrica's face, 'have you met any old ones?'

'Hardly, since there are no Glockenau peasants here, nor yet any of my father's old comrades. Have you anything else to ask? I think it is time for me to dress;' and Ulrica hurried from the room and betook herself to the

apartment in which Mademoiselle Séraphine had been waiting on thorns for the last half-hour.

'I almost wish I had told her I couldn't take her in,' reflected Ulrica as she mounted the stairs; 'she always seems to act like an irritant upon my nerves. I can't make out why she has come.'

When, an hour later, Charlotte opened the drawing-room door, she stood still on the threshold with an exclamation on her lips. Ulrica was standing in the centre of the room buttoning her gloves; Mademoiselle Séraphine, on her knees, was giving some mysterious touches and pinches to the silken folds of the skirt. A costly fur wrap lay on a chair close by. A few paces off, Mrs. Byrd, herself arrayed in a brand-new ruby velvet, was standing in speechless admiration. Lord Cannington's warning with respect to the white frock and the snowdrops had been quite superfluous. Ulrica had, from the first, repudiated the idea of anything over-youthful in her costume. The heavy cream silk, relieved by a great cluster of scarlet berries on the skirt, had been pronounced by its fabricator to be 'much more the thing for a "married woman," my lady,' but its rich simplicity most admirably suited the statuesque proportions of Ulrica's figure and showed up her ripe, glowing beauty to perfection. In her dark hair the rowans burnt like fire, and a single row of pearls clasped her throat.

'I was against the idea,' said Mrs. Byrd, who was slowly walking round and round her charge, 'but I confess myself vanquished. It was an inspiration.'

Mrs. Byrd was in the highest of spirits. For the first time for five years she was going to a ball in a dress of which neither trimming nor lining, neither buttons nor bows, had ever seen service before, and the sensation was exhilarating, all the more exhilarating from the fact that she would never even require to see the bill for that dress. Ulrica had insisted on her accepting it as a present, pointing out that it was absurd to expect that Mrs. Byrd's private wardrobe could be expected to stand the wear and tear which the office of chaperon brought with it, and Mrs. Byrd, after a brief resistance, had admitted that she was not too proud to resign herself to this view of the case.

Charlotte said nothing when she saw Ulrica in her ball-dress, but her eyes never left the girl until, followed by the curious glances and the admiring whispers of domestics, posted at every vantage-point and peeping round every corner, she had disappeared into the carriage. Then she sat down on the nearest chair and wrung her hands. A feeling of utter despair had come over her.

The Russian Embassy was one blaze of light when Ulrica with her chaperon stepped out of the carriage. Ulrica was quite silent as they mounted the staircase; there was a flush on her face, and her heart was beating, not with trepidation, but with an excited curiosity. This was the beginning of something new, something that was to be a chapter in her life. On every landing and in every available corner costly shrubs were grouped; silk trains rustled over the carpeted steps, the buzz of many voices, half-drowned in the rising and falling of dreamy waltz-music, floated down to meet them. It seemed to Ulrica that she had not got eyes enough wherewith to look about her and drink in all the marvels with which she was surrounded. So eagerly was she glancing to the right and to the left that she all but omitted to shake hands with her hostess, nor did she ask herself what was the meaning of the look of blank astonishment with which that lady received her.

They were in the ball-room by this time. The waltz had just come to an end as they entered, and the couples were breaking up. It was a moment of comparative quiet and comparative—only very comparative—emptiness, just enough to give a certain conspicuous prominence to each new apparition in the doorway. Ulrica, having in her breathless wonder moved several steps forward into the room and standing for the moment entirely isolated, asked herself why the buzz of conversation had suddenly grown so faint, why so many faces were turned towards the entrance, and why, in so many eyes, was written that same blank wonder which she had observed in those of her hostess. What could they be looking at? And how came they all to be looking at one and the same thing, when there were so many beautiful things to admire? Had all

these people seen so many gilt candelabra and sheets of mirror and banks of flowers in their life that they could so calmly turn their backs upon these?

The question floated through Ulrica's mind, but in the next instant the answer had come. In one moment she had realised that *she* was the object that was being devoured by those hundreds of eyes on all sides,—look which way she would, she met their gaze. As in a flash of light it became clear to her that of all the beautiful things around her *she* was the most beautiful, of all the wonders on all sides *she* the most wonderful, and all at once, as she noted all these people hanging upon her every movement, her heart swelled proudly with the consciousness of this power that was put into her hand. For one moment her lips parted and she smiled as though this crowd in the ball-room were a herd of slaves and she their rightful sovereign, then all at once the many eyes seemed to grow oppressive, and turning abruptly she looked round as though for an escape.

‘It was the garden-party again, only ten times more so,’ wrote Miss Kitty Milford, when she was describing the scene to her usual correspondent. ‘The faces were a study. The men’s all had that silly vacant look upon them which I am sure you have often observed on occasions of this sort, and which seems to reduce them all momentarily to one level of intelligence, and the women either looked conspicuously indifferent or else resigned. I don’t think that in that first moment anybody exactly felt jealous—it was too hopeless a case for that. Stars don’t feel jealous of the sun, I suppose. Later on, at supper-time, when they had recovered from the first shock, somebody discovered that her hands were sunburnt and a good deal spoilt. You can’t imagine what a weight that took off everybody’s mind; the dejected beauties looked lovingly at their own lily fingers and revived like flowers in the dew.’

In the moment that Ulrica turned to escape from the gaze of the ball-room, she almost ran against a gentleman who had been watching her during the last minute.

‘Whither so fast?’ he asked, with a dry laugh. ‘Scared already?’

Ulrica recognised her dinner-neighbour of two nights ago. 'And what do you think of it all?' he inquired, twirling his pointed grey moustache and smiling his most sardonic smile.

'I don't think anything, I haven't had time to think. I feel as though something were happening, only I don't exactly know what.'

'Don't you? I do. I'll tell you what's happening; the event of the London season is happening. Do you see all those heads moving, and do you hear all those excited S's flying about? It's you who are at the bottom of it all. From this moment forward London knows you.'

'London certainly stares very hard,' said Ulrica, beginning to recover herself.

'Yes, but it's not a thoughtless stare. London calculates very neatly, too! Of every fifty people in the room forty are, at this moment, calculating the possible advantages or disadvantages which your appearance in London may bring to them. Do you see that row of dowagers over there? Half of them hate you already because they have got marriageable daughters, the other half love you because they have got marriageable sons.'

'Not so fast,' said Ulrica, laughing, for her spirits were beginning to rise, excited by the scene around her. 'Isn't that enough for a first lesson?'

'I am almost done. In another minute I shall leave you to your fate. Remember only that every person who speaks civilly to you this evening does so with an object, and that there is a motive behind every smile. It may not necessarily be a motive directly connected with matrimony,—self-interest has all sorts of ramifications. Some of them count upon you for adding brilliancy to their dinner-tables, others will expect to be invited to your house, none will forget that you have money to spend on any fancy that may cross your mind, and that a girl of your age is not generally a troublesome object to plunder. Here is your chaperon, bringing the first batch of vultures; I shall inquire later on how you have fared,' and with his hands behind him Lord Cannington sauntered away into the crowd.

It was a youthful and impecunious earl whom Mrs. Byrd was leading up to Ulrica. His hair and his face were of two different shades of red, which, however, did not match, of which fact he seemed to be acutely aware. Amid burning blushes which only served to accentuate the unfortunate assortment of tints, he stammered out a request for a dance.

‘I can’t dance,’ replied Ulrica calmly. ‘I never learnt.’

There was a movement of interest among the bystanders, and the young earl immediately collapsed. Others succeeded him. The heiress’s declaration that she could not dance seemed not in the least to lower her value in the ball-room. Though she did not dance she could be talked to, she could be taken in to supper, she could be escorted from one room to another. An hour had flown by, Ulrica scarcely knew how, and her triumph seemed ever growing. She was being talked to in broken English by an evidently already deeply smitten French *attaché*, when a professional joker who was standing near, pointing to a group of three persons, audibly observed: ‘The World, the Flesh, and the Devil.’

The trio he indicated consisted of two gentlemen and a lady. Of the lady it will be enough to say that if she had not happened to be a duchess she could scarcely have failed to make the fortune of any travelling show accustomed to have a Fat Lady on its list of attractions. The ‘Devil’ of the trio was represented by Lord Cannington, whose bushy eyebrows and stiffly waxed moustache, seen from this angle, appeared even more Mephistophelian than usual. And the ‘World’—Ulrica looked again—surely the smooth, prosperous back of that typical ‘World’ was familiar to her? Mr. Rockingham—of course, as he turned his head she recognised the ambassador, and in the same instant, abandoning the stout duchess, he advanced towards her with the smile of an old friend.

‘False to my tryst,’ remarked Mr. Rockingham, taking the place beside her, and speaking not quite as calmly as usual, for his eyes, too, were dazzled by the radiance of her beauty. ‘The first waltz, alas, had become a thing of the past before I had set foot in the room.’

‘That is not of much consequence since I have not begun my dancing-lessons yet,’ answered Ulrica with a suddenly clouded brow. In the moment that she recognised Mr. Rockingham the riddle of Charlotte’s sudden appearance in London had become clear to her. The society column of the *Spy* had no doubt informed the widow of his arrival. At this new proof of Charlotte’s infatuation the irritation of the afternoon woke up again in Ulrica. Mr. Rockingham, unaware of the cause, looked at her in some surprise, startled by her expression of displeasure.

‘I trust you do not put down my late appearance to any neglect on my part—it was solely owing to some business dispatches, which—’

But Ulrica was already laughing, the cloud quite chased from her brow, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

‘Never mind what it was owing to, you can make up for it in some other way.’

‘By a square dance, perhaps?’ suggested Mr. Rockingham, greatly relieved.

‘No; I can’t risk that yet—by coming to tea to-morrow, or to dinner, if you like.’

It had suddenly occurred to Ulrica that to have Mr. Rockingham to dinner, and to put Charlotte on thorns by letting her imagine that she favored his attentions, would be a somewhat entertaining way of revenging herself for the irritation caused by the widow’s sudden descent upon the scene. A dangerous game? Bah, that idea does not often occur in a ball-room,—to Ulrica, in the flush of her triumph, her newly discovered power only just beginning to work in her hands, her nerves tingling with the echo of the music, her eyes dazzled with the brilliancy around her, there was no chance of it occurring just yet.

Everything was a sham—so her new *cicerone* had said—why should she alone set up for a piece of honesty?

‘The hours will be counted to the moment of your appearance,’ she observed, a suggestive smile playing about the corners of her lips.

Mr. Rockingham was not quite sure whether he heard aright. His hopes were strong, but he had not been pre-

pared for quite such a miraculous rapidity in the progress of his suit.

‘By whom?’ he asked in a subdued murmur.

‘By whom?’ repeated Ulrica, playing with the red berries on her dress; ‘why, by your old playmate, of course, whom, I take for granted, you will be delighted to see.’

‘Is Lady Nevyll in town?’

The ambassador’s face had so suddenly grown to twice its usual length that Ulrica laughed outright.

‘Come to dinner to-morrow and you will see.’

‘And am I to be expected only by my old playmate? Is my coming absolutely indifferent to—every one else?’

‘Has your hostess declared that it is indifferent to her?’ asked Ulrica, coquettishly, over the top of her fan. It was only within the last few months that she had learnt the art of handling a fan at all, but most intelligent female natures are imitative, and Ulrica had already had occasion to observe that glances sent over the tops of fans are more effective than ordinary glances, and for this reason, probably, very widely practised in ball-rooms.

The words, even without the glance, would have been enough for Mr. Rockingham. Ready as he always was to meet all proofs of regard for his person half-way, he was not slow to welcome this happy omen. ‘If I had known the pace at which the thing would go,’ was his last conscious thought as he dropped into a feverish sleep on the night—or rather on the morning after the ball at the Russian Embassy, ‘I need not even have asked for eight weeks’ leave. According to all the symptoms of the case I can be back at my post with an easy conscience before four weeks are over’

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MIDDLE OF THE WHIRLPOOL.

LORD CANNINGTON had been right. When Ulrica awoke on the morrow of her first ball, she found herself famous. The society papers teemed with references to the Austrian beauty who had taken the world by storm. It so happened that a suitable object for enthusiasm had lately been wanting, and this fresh excuse for going into raptures was therefore seized upon. That this girl who now sat at their dinner-tables had once milked cows and churned butter—as was dimly understood to be the case—only served to add a certain piquancy to her other charms. It was supposed to be Lord Cannington who first christened her 'The Queen of Curds and Cream'; whosoever idea it was, it spread like wildfire, and in a wonderfully short time Ulrica came to be for London at large, not 'Countess Eldringen,' not the 'Austrian Heiress,' but simply 'The Queen of Curds and Cream.'

However plainly she might betray her inexperience of society, society refused to be ruffled. Mistakes which in a penniless maiden would have been mercilessly condemned as 'bad form' only caused people to smile blandly and to observe that a little originality was so refreshing, 'so unconventional, don't you know.' And the speakers said this in perfect good faith, honestly unconscious of the coloured glasses through which they looked. Ulrica could have no better scene than London for the field of her triumphs; in Vienna, too, the most exclusive of all aristocracies would have ended by bending their stiff necks before the might of this great wealth, but they would have done so with an afterthought, a lurking reservation in their minds that, though the power of money is no longer to be denied, yet for a person who can produce a complete set of ancestors to make up to a person unable to stand examination on this point always remains an unspeakable condescension.

They would have grovelled to her in public and sneered at her in private. We English are more honest; at sight of such a golden calf as this the very idea of a pedigree vanishes from our minds, and we go down plump upon both our knees at once.

In a very short space 'The Queen of Curds and Cream' had become as much the rage as though she had been a new shade of colour or a popular waltz tune. It was the fashion to rave about her, just as it sometimes is the fashion to dress one's hair high or to smoke cigarettes. Every moment of her day was claimed by eager acquaintances. Ball followed ball, dinner-party trod upon the heels of dinner-party, concerts, picnics, routs—they all tumbled on the top of each other like the colours in a kaleidoscope. In a certain sense it was more fatiguing than the work at the Marienhof had ever been, yet Ulrica refused no invitation. 'As good a way of forgetting as any other'—the words came to her like an echo of a far-off time. Who was it who had spoken? She dared not think—fortunately she had no time to think. Her health seemed invulnerable; her beauty, enhanced by every advantage of dress—and at this time she began to spend money lavishly on dress as well as on everything else—shone out with double splendour in its new setting. Neither did anybody ever see her except in the best of spirits. Like a person who has fasted long, the wine of flattery had rushed at one bound to her head.

'Is this the middle of the whirlpool?' she asked of Lord Cannington, meeting him on one occasion at a particularly crowded rout, 'or is there a yet deeper depth?'

Lord Cannington never obtruded himself, but he had a way of appearing at her elbow, ready to point out and interpret to her the sights around. Between the young girl and the old worldling a sort of curious *camaraderie* had sprung up. The barefaced materialism of this cheerful cynic, who, while rejecting the kernel of everything, yet managed to make a very comfortable living of the husks, was the very thing to suit her present mood. The more she got to know him the better she seemed to understand those influences which had surrounded Gilbert's life and

worked his mental ruin. At moments she could almost fancy that she was listening to the same evil genius who had whispered in his ear.

In nothing were the new influences of her life so apparent as in her intercourse with Charlotte's old lover, Mr. Rockingham. Under ordinary circumstances that mischievous desire of provoking Charlotte which had given the first impulse to her apparent favouring of Mr. Rockingham would probably have died a natural death, but on this soil and under these influences it increased instead of diminished. Dating from the morrow of her first ball, when he came to dinner at her special request, and when she had amused herself by frustrating Charlotte's spasmodic endeavours to monopolise the ambassador's attention, her encouragement of Mr. Rockingham, though capricious and unequal, had been taken note of by society, and had driven half the eligible *épouseurs* of London wild with jealousy. She seemed to have discovered an unsuspected vein of cruelty within her soul—pity and tenderness were turned to stone. Since she had been cheated of her happiness, why should she not cheat some other woman in return, and thus be avenged upon the world and upon fate?

To Charlotte these weeks were one long agony, and yet she could not tear herself away from London. The question of the 'urgent shopping' had died out long ago; she gave no reason for her prolonged stay in Park Lane, yet no one had any doubts on the subject. She was fighting against fate, but without vigour and without zest—the struggle was too unequal. How can the subdued charms of after-summer hope to be recognised when spring with all its blossoms has burst unawares upon the scene? What chance has the scentless crocus of being gathered when the perfumed rose is there? All those little innocent subterfuges, those wily attempts artificially to enhance the remains of her beauty, how ludicrous they suddenly appeared! What was the use of adjusting her laces with such painful nicety, since Ulrica in the most careless of attires outshone her completely? Why be forever anxiously contriving to place herself only in the most becoming of lights, when the broadest glare of daylight upon Ulrica's face only served

to show up her youthful beauty more triumphantly? In her despair poor Charlotte once had the idea of appealing to Mrs. Byrd in the hope of gathering some consolation, for she had not forgotten that that lady had shown some considerable interest in the history of the buried romance. But here she also woful disappointment awaited her. 'An old playmate, did you say he was?' repeated Mrs. Byrd briskly. 'Ah, yes, to be sure, I remember now, you told me something of the sort last year; but you don't want him to be playing games with you now, do you?'

'But yet you said then,' faltered Charlotte—'you seemed to think that he had not quite forgotten old times.'

'Did I? Very possibly; but he seems to prefer new times, on the whole,' laughed Mrs. Byrd, from whose mind the whole 'playmate' affair had been dismissed as soon as it had served its purpose.

'I rather wonder how it will end.' This last remark was not made to Charlotte, but was a private reflection of Mrs. Byrd's own. She really was very much puzzled to know how it would all end; her *protégée* had got beyond her control and comprehension.

'I really cannot make out what more you want or what you are waiting for,' she remarked one day in the beginning of June. 'You have had three coronets offered to you in four weeks; I should have thought that was pretty fair work, but I don't believe you feel even particularly flattered. Sometimes I think that you are making fun of everything and everybody. Where did you learn the art of driving people so out of their minds? I didn't know they taught flirting in pine forests?'

Ulrica laughed. She was lounging in an easy-chair, her hands clasped behind her neck, her embroidered shoe balanced on the tip of her foot. Through the open window near her the hum of the streets floated in with the warm air and the scent of the mignonette in the boxes.

'Oh, I always do thoroughly whatever I do,' she observed, throwing her head a little further back against the cushions. 'I have had hard times enough, so why shouldn't I have some fun at last?'

'Why not indeed? Don't imagine, pray, that I intend

to moralise, only how much longer do you suppose your health will stand the wear and tear of this particular sort of fun? As for me, I am almost done for; you will presently have to advertise for another chaperon. I should advise one fresh from the country.'

'Oh, nonsense, I can't give you up,' said Ulrica imperiously, 'I've got used to you. You will have to hold out a little longer. I've not had half enough of it yet. I have got all sorts of plans.'

'Surely you don't intend to furnish the drawing-room all over again? The new hangings have not been up a week. Or to have a marble pavement laid down in the lobby?'

'No; the drawing-room can remain for the present. I am not going to buy any more furniture just now, but I am going to give a ball.'

'*A la bonne heure!*' cried Mrs. Byrd, reviving on the instant; 'and of course you will invite every celebrity in town—*please* do, like a dear, and I can lay in stores of guests for Collingwood.'

'But it is not to be an ordinary ball—anybody can do that, and ordinary balls are, after all, very monotonous. I want something new. I should like to astonish London, since London has almost done astonishing me. Try and think of some plan.'

'A costume ball?' suggested Mrs. Byrd.

Ulrica shrugged her shoulders disdainfully. 'In order to give people the opportunity of wearing out the costumes they got for Lady Filagree's *fête*. What an idea! Try and think of something else.'

Mrs. Byrd applied herself to the task, but could think of nothing better than an abnormal display of orchids, an abnormal number of Chinese lanterns, or a peculiarly brilliant *cotillon* to give a special character to the entertainment, all of which suggestions were in turn rejected, as wanting in originality.

'Really, unless you smother your guests in a rain of roses like that Roman emperor—what's his name?—I don't quite see what line you can strike out,' she remarked at last, in despair. 'They're in full season now, at least, so the idea is not unfeasible.'

'I would rather smother them in something that is not in full season,' began Ulrica. 'I have it!' she cried, suddenly sitting upright. 'I am going to give an ice *fête*.'

'An ice *fête* in June?' repeated Mrs. Byrd, almost aghast.

'Exactly, in June—therein lies the charm. There's nothing particular about giving one in January. Oh, that look on your face settles it; if all London only looks half as astonished as that I shall be quite satisfied. I read the other day of an American millionaire who invited his friends to a skating-party on midsummer's day; there is no earthly reason why I should not do the same. We are in the nineteenth century, you know, when everything is only a question of money. The big conservatory downstairs at the back of the dining-room shall be turned into an ice-tank, or the whole yard might be roofed over and artificially frozen. There must be blocks of ice in every corner, and there must be a big arch built of ice-blocks, and by rights the decorations should all be wintry—snowdrops, and Christmas roses, and so on; then something could be done with electric lamps, I suppose, placed among the ice-blocks. Oh yes, it's a splendid idea. At least no one will complain of the heat, though possibly some of the dowagers may have colds in their heads next day.'

'Really, my dear, I am beginning to think that you must be a direct descendant of the man who invented the rose-shower. A celebrated historian who was staying at Collingwood last year told me that the Roman emperors were the only people who knew how to spend money properly. What puzzles me is the rapidity with which you have fallen into the knack. If the thing is only feasible it will be the hit of the season. And, by-the-bye, my dear, if it does come off, there is that poor Mrs. White who begged me the other day with tears in her eyes to put in a word for her three girls; she hoped for a dinner-party, but this, of course, would give them better chances still, and then there is—'

'Oh, never fear, I am going to leave out nobody. Any one who likes can have a share of the spoil. By-the-bye, what was it that old Lady Muzzleton was talking to

you so earnestly about last night? Was she, too, giving you a message for me?’

Mrs. Byrd looked as much embarrassed as it lay in her nature to be. ‘She was; but to tell you the truth, my dear, I haven’t quite had the face to deliver it. It was about that hundred pounds you were so kind as to oblige her with last month, when her supplies were late.’

‘And does she think I want it back again in such a hurry?’

‘It’s not that—in fact, she couldn’t give it you back now, even if she wanted to ever so much. It seems that her supplies are late again—if, indeed, they exist at all,’ added Mrs. Byrd frankly. ‘What she was saying to me last night was that if I couldn’t persuade you to oblige her with another small loan she really didn’t know what would happen—probably she would have to counter-order her court-dress or else take back the invitations to her *rout*.’

‘Poor old soul! She needn’t do that,’ said Ulrica, with a face so inscrutable that Mrs. Byrd could make nothing of it.

If Ulrica’s object was to astonish London, she had gained her end. Not a word was breathed of the surprise in store until, after various consultations and experiments, the plan had proved itself to be feasible and the preparations were already far advanced. It was on a peculiarly sultry day, that London, lying in easy-chairs, panting at open windows, fanning itself and mopping its brow, was electrified by the invitation to an ice *fête*, endorsed by the request to bring plenty of wraps and a special note to the skaters not to leave their skates at home.

The thing, first treated as a joke, was soon ascertained to be a solid reality, and from that moment onwards the expectation of this wonder monopolised conversation. People who might have had the money to do the thing themselves were provoked that the idea had not occurred to them in time; other people who neither had the money nor had been visited by the idea talked of bad taste and the love of display.

In very truth, however, it was not the love of display, but solely an ever-growing hunger after excitement, which was the mainspring of Ulrica’s action.

Even Charlotte had been caught by the infection of the ice *fête*, and seemed more than half-inclined to stake her last wavering hopes on what it might bring.

‘Since it is to be in the house,’ she said to Mrs. Byrd, ‘do you think that there could be any harm in my appearing? I could wear lilac, you know, and of course I should not dance. After all, it is more than a year and a half since my husband’s death.’

‘You must decide that for yourself,’ replied Mrs. Byrd, who was too busy planning decorations to attend to the point.

But to decide for herself was just the very thing that Charlotte could not do. She would and she would not, she ordered her dress and counter-ordered it and ordered it again, and though it came home punctually on the morning of the ice-ball, she had not yet made up her mind as to whether she would wear it or no. It was Charlotte’s misfortune always to be standing at cross-roads, always with a dozen paths diverging at her feet, forever to be falling not between two, but between a dozen of stools. Ulrica’s way, on the contrary, though sometimes it was steep and rocky and sometimes broad and smooth, of the sort which leads to destruction, was always clearly marked, without any of those deceptive corners and perplexing twists which so sorely puzzled poor Charlotte.

It was drawing towards evening, and still Charlotte stood at the cross-roads and hesitated. Should she re-enter the world to-day or should she continue this farce of a widow’s mourning for yet another while? The dress was there all ready. She would wait till she heard Ulrica pass the door of her bedroom before she finally decided. Surely it was getting late; why had Ulrica not gone to dress?

If Charlotte had been able to throw a glance into the morning-room straight below, she would have seen that Ulrica was so engrossed in the perusal of a newspaper article that she had all but forgotten the dressing-hour. The evening post had brought a pile of letters and papers; they lay beside her on the table untouched for the most part. The first article on which her eye had chanced to alight had immediately arrested her attention. It was not

a political article, rather one of those descriptive articles more generally found in magazines. 'Letters from a Pine Forest,' was the heading, and obviously this was not the first of the series. It was the words 'pine forest' which had first attracted her, and the further she read the more a strange, wondering yearning was stirred within her. There was not much attempt at style in the article, but it breathed the spirit of rustic solitude. Ulrica's thoughts flew to the woods she knew so well and had once loved so dearly; she seemed to be treading those mossy paths again, to be listening to the murmur of just such a double-voiced rivulet as the one here described.

'Come in'—she interrupted her own train of thought, for there had been a knock at the door. To be sure, what was she thinking of? This was not Glockenau, this was London. Mademoiselle Séraphine, wild with impatience, had come to summon her mistress to the toilet-table. The guests would be here in half an hour, and not so much as a hair-pin in its place yet.

'I am coming,' said Ulrica, gathering up the letters beside her. More than half of them were for Charlotte; she sorted them out mechanically, her thoughts still with that other 'letter' which had moved her almost like a message from another world. One of the letters, she observed half unconsciously, had been to Morton and had been re-directed from there. There was nothing extraordinary about this, and probably the circumstance would have passed unnoticed by her had her attention not been passingly caught by the peculiarly stiff and ungainly writing on the envelope. Afterwards she fancied she had noticed that the stamp upon this letter was a French one, but at the moment this detail made no impression on her mind.

With these letters in her hand she stopped at Charlotte's door and knocked. The door was opened eagerly.

'You are going to dress? I have been thinking it over, and perhaps if I come down a little later and don't go into the dancing-room it might compromise matters—what do you—'

'Nothing; I think nothing; I have no opinion whatever. All I see is that you are dying to be there. Here are your

letters,' and she thrust them into Charlotte's hand and disappeared into her own room.

When, a little later, Ulrica emerged again, ready dressed, the first carriage was already heard rolling up to the door.

'I wonder what conclusion she has come to,' laughed Ulrica to herself, as she again approached Charlotte's room. 'I suppose it would only be charitable to help her to make up her mind. Are you ready?' she called through the closed door. 'Shall I wait for you?'

There was no answer from Charlotte, and Ulrica knocked impatiently, repeating her question in a louder voice. Still there was no movement within, and, somewhat startled at the silence, she quickly turned the handle and entered.

Charlotte, still in her black morning dress, just as Ulrica had left her half an hour ago, was sitting on a chair at the foot of the bed, staring straight in front of her with wide-open eyes and a face of deathly pallor. Her features, which Ulrica could not clearly distinguish because of the shadow cast by the canopy of the bed, wore a pinched and distorted look, as of a person who has suddenly been struck with a mortal terror.

'Did you not hear me knock?' asked Ulrica from the doorway. 'I am just going down. Why, you have not even begun to dress! Have you finally made up your mind to remain invisible, after all?'

Charlotte started and looked up.

'I? No, I have not made up my mind,' she said huskily.

'You haven't seen a ghost, have you, in this last half-hour?' and Ulrica advanced into the room. 'Why are you looking so startled?'

'Nothing, I am not startled; what makes you think so?'

She rose as she spoke, and Ulrica perceived that she was holding a piece of paper crumpled up in her hand. It was only as she rose that she seemed to perceive this herself, for glancing downwards she started again and quickly pushed the paper into her pocket. At the same moment Ulrica, seeing an envelope on the floor, stooped to pick it up. It was the envelope of the letter with the French stamp

and of which the original address was written in those queer upright characters which had for a moment arrested her attention. It had not occurred to her when she first set eyes on the letter, but seeing it a second time she was struck with the idea that the writing was too stiff and unnatural to be anything but disguised.

'Have you an anonymous correspondent?' she asked carelessly; but in the same instant the paper she had scarcely touched was snatched away by Charlotte.

'Oh,' laughed Ulrica. 'No alarm! Your secrets are quite safe. Even if curiosity did happen to be one of my faults, I should have no time to indulge it just now. I believe the people are arriving. Well, what is it to be, yes or no?' and without waiting for the answer, Ulrica hastened away to receive her guests.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ICE-BALL.

'It's the tip-top thing of the season!'

'As good as the snow-ballet at Drury Lane!'

'A slice of St. Petersburg transplanted to London.'

'For my part, I never seriously believed it would come off at all.'

'Should give a good deal to know at what figure the whole thing stands.'

'Just look! There is Percy Longham actually practising his famous eights, as coolly as though this were Prince's in January.'

'And just fancy the luxury of shivering to one's heart's content on June 24th! This day deserves to become historical.'

The ice-ball was waxing towards its height, and such and such-like remarks were flying from mouth to mouth. Ulrica's fantastical idea had been carried out with that perfection which the command of unlimited means can alone

ensure. Not a hitch anywhere; everything worked with absolute smoothness. In the miniature lake, with its frozen surface and the great ice-blocks picturesquely disposed at its edge, it was indeed hard to recognise an ordinary London stable-yard, roofed over with such cunning artifice as all but to delude the bewildered spectator into the belief that there was nothing between him and the night-sky overhead. In point of fact, it was only the very boldest of the bold who ventured upon this much observed stage; yet, though non-skaters were well provided for in the dancing-room near by, the *improvisé* rink remained the centre of attraction. The problem of inventing a costume which would exactly fit the exigencies of the case was one which had caused many sleepless nights to the leading dress-makers in town, but which had been triumphantly solved—witness the many exquisite visions of richest red or softest blue, or golden-brown or silver-grey which were flashing past to the ring of the skates.

In the midst of the fairy-like scene, Ulrica stood under the arch built of ice-blocks which played the part of portal to this enchanted region, receiving the endless stream of guests not even yet quite exhausted. She did not skate, and had therefore chosen a long-trained white silk dress.

Diamonds shone in her hair and on her neck—the magnificent Nevyll diamonds; and except for their rainbow flash there was no speck of colour about her. ‘I am going to play queen of the ice and snow,’ she had said jestingly to Mrs. Byrd; but in this she had failed. No more impossible ice-queen than this dark girl with the glowing lips and the glance of fire could well be imagined. Lord Cannington, with his usual frankness, was not slow to express his opinion on the subject.

‘It’s the only mistake you have made in the arrangements for this evening,’ he said to her at the first opportunity. ‘Don’t you know that an ice-queen is always expected to be fair and colourless, and—well, *icy*—everything, in fact, that you are not. You would have done far better to have put on your dairy-maid garments and kept to your kingdom of curds and cream. Those stones are meant to represent frozen drops, I suppose?—all nonsense,

I tell you. That star on your forehead would have melted away long ago.'

'In which case it ought by rights to be trickling down my nose at this moment. How very uncomfortable! But I forgive you if that is the only fault you have to find with my ice-feast.'

'It is the only one. I approve of the idea of the thing even more than of the thing itself. It shows that my teachings have not fallen on sterile ground. Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow you die: you have grasped the very essence of the only philosophy which stands the test of reality. And, by the way, talking of eating and drinking, I don't believe you have taken so much as a sandwich yet. The people seem to have done arriving; do you not think you have honestly earned your supper?'

As Ulrica, escorted by her grey-haired cavalier, moved through the crowded rooms, all eyes eagerly followed the queen of the feast. Compliments were whispered, congratulations were uttered, every one seemed striving for a glance or a smile. And almost everybody got what they wanted, for Ulrica's spirits ran recklessly high to-night. The yearning pain awakened by that 'letter' from the pine forest had frightened herself. It must be overcome at any price; hence that fierce light in her eyes and that hot colour on her cheeks which turned the ice-queen's robes to a mockery.

'What a wonderful show of old women,' observed Lord Cannington as they passed through a room which was occupied almost exclusively by chaperons.

'Wonderful!' said Ulrica, letting her eyes roam round the room. She had not looked far when her gaze was met by another gaze so distinct from anything she had seen to-night that her attention was perforce arrested.

She looked again, more keenly this time. What she saw was nothing but a small, round-faced old lady, with silver-grey hair parted on her forehead and combed carefully over her ears, attired in a high black silk dress made in the fashion of twenty years ago, and which even by candle-light showed at places a suspicious shininess, and wearing one-buttoned black kid gloves upon her hands, which lay

crossed in her lap. On a chair beside her were piled several white ball wraps, of the light, fluffy sort then worn by girls, and over which she was evidently mounting guard. No one was speaking to her, and her neighbours on either side, the one attired in crimson brocade the other resplendent in blue velvet, ignored her completely, yet she seemed contented, though perhaps a little sleepy. By her dress alone she would have been conspicuous, but it was not the dress which had caught Ulrica's attention, it was the gaze that met hers. For a long time past she had seen nothing of the sort. Amongst all these eyes fixed on her, with admiration, with envy, with feverish love perhaps, and perhaps with deadly hate, there were none that had looked at her just as this old lady's blue eyes were looking at her now. Surely it could not be possible that that woman was *pitying* her? Ridiculous idea! Once, long, long ago it surely must have been, she had seen that same look of pity written in eyes of this same faded blue, but she could not remember now when or how that had been. And who could she be? How did this figure in its quaint incongruity come to be elbowing the very fashion-plates of society? Hostess though she was, Ulrica had to reflect for a minute before she was able to recollect that among the many invitations applied for at second- and third-hand there had been a request on the part of poor Mrs. White (who, having a delicate chest and three daughters, was distracted between the terror of catching cold at the ice-feast and the fear of her girls losing this splendid chance), as to whether she might send Amy and Nelly and Ada under the care of an old friend, 'a very quiet person who does not generally go out, but who won't be at all in the way.' Here clearly was the explanation of this mysterious old lady's presence.

Even after she had passed on, and, still on Lord Cannington's arm, had entered the supper-room, that strange, unusual gaze continued to haunt Ulrica.

'You don't mean to say that you are going to turn *pensive*?' remarked Lord Cannington in a tone of civil disgust, as they sat down at a vacant table. 'Do you know that you have not spoken a word for the last three minutes?'

'Have I not? Well, lost time can always be made up for. What will you have? Let us begin with ortolans and champagne.'

The ortolans and champagne were brought, and soon Ulrica was talking again as gaily as any one in the room. Not that there were many people in this distant supper-room at this moment, for the early suppers had already been and gone, for the present, while the bulk of the dancers and skaters could not yet tear themselves away from the scene of action. A waltz had struck up soon after they sat down, and within five minutes the room was all but deserted.

'Each of those ortolans is an ideal representative of its race,' remarked Lord Cannington approvingly, 'and the champagne is equal to any I have tasted this season, not to be mentioned in the same breath with the beverage of that name generally provided at a so-called "lady's ball." Those lamp-shades, too, are exactly the right colour under the circumstances. And to think that there are fools who miss enjoyments like these because they strain after ideals, and who declare that this world is a wretched place to live in! For idiots of that stamp no doubt it is, but for people like you and me this world is a very comfortable, warm, bright place, in which there are always lots of prizes to be gained by the wary, and lots of fun going for the gay folk. Am I right?'

'Undoubtedly. I am having some excellent fun at this moment.'

'How? Don't keep me out of it, please.'

'Look at those two dowagers over there. I have been watching them for the last five minutes. They have been straining every nerve to note each breath I draw. I can see by the very quiver of their head-dresses that they are talking scandal.'

'Scandal about you and me,' repeated Lord Cannington, drawing up his eyebrows.

'Oh, well,' laughed Ulrica thoughtlessly, 'there is no limit to the imagination of dowagers; there's no saying whether you are not suspected of having lured me into this distant corner in order more conveniently to make love to me.'

The poor creatures don't know that we are teacher and disciple.'

Ulrica glanced up from her plate still laughing, her white teeth displayed, her eyes dancing with fun as she looked for a response to her jest. But Lord Cannington was busy fishing an atom of cork out of his champagne glass, and did not immediately meet her eyes.

'Ah!' he drily remarked. 'Appearances are against me, no doubt.'

'Never fear, your character will soon be cleared.'

'And supposing I don't want it cleared?' he asked, putting aside his glass and looking straight into Ulrica's face.

There was something so astonishing in his look that she laid down her fork without speaking and remained staring at him waiting for more.

'Look here,' said Lord Cannington, speaking in just his ordinary chatty tone, 'you have learnt a good deal since I began to instruct you; but those old ladies over there, after all, have lived longer in the world than you have, and therefore know more of it than you do. They think I have brought you here to make love to you; in that they are mistaken, for an old man to make love to a young woman is always in bad taste; but in the main idea they are right. I brought you in here to—what shall we say?—propose an arrangement to you, which I trust will meet with your approval. Candidly, now, have you any insuperable objection to marrying me?'

As Ulrica did not speak, but remained staring at him with wide-open eyes, he quietly continued: 'The idea is astonishing at first sight, I admit it; but consider it closely, and the incongruities vanish. Though our ages do not suit, our ideas do. I am sixty-five years of age, but what I have to offer you is by no means to be despised; one of the oldest titles in England, and absolute freedom of action, mark that—a freedom without which a woman of your temperament would find but poor enjoyment in life, and which a younger husband would scarcely accord you. That is for your side of the bargain; as for mine, I am satisfied that I shall not draw the shorter end. I have told you

that I do not intend to make love to you; but I happen to be a connoisseur in beauty, and you happen to be the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. If I can afford—with my title—to buy the luxury of having a beautiful wife, why should I not do so? especially as you have a fortune, which, properly applied, will enable us both to extract from life the largest possible amount of enjoyment.'

Ulrica was sitting bolt upright on her chair. 'You are asking me to marry you?' she said abruptly, as he paused.

The Marquis inclined his head.

'I have taken the liberty of laying the idea before you for your consideration. Take my advice and think it over. I should never dream of hurrying your decision.'

Without another word she rose, and, leaving her gloves and her fan on the table beside her plate, walked straight across the half-emptied room, past the watchful dowagers, and, having reached the passage, stood for a moment looking wildly about her. Something of the old hunted feeling of former days had come over her again. The memory of her meetings with Baron Bernersdorf, of her indignation against Franzl, of her flight from the peasant-house, came back to her mind in a confused jumble, but nothing had been quite so bad as this. So this man, too, had been pursuing his motives, even while sneering at the self-interest of others. And, after all, why not? Was this not the very acme of his theories? Could there be a more triumphant demonstration of his teaching than just this *dénoûment*? The thoughts surged through her brain as she stood for a moment in the doorway of the supper-room, looking to the right and to the left, as though considering which way she should go.

A group consisting of a lady in a lilac dress and three gentlemen who were talking to her had formed itself in the passage. The lady was Lady Nevyll, and one of the three gentlemen was Mr. Rockingham, who had seen his hostess enter the supper-room on Lord Cannington's arm and had therefore set himself to watch the door.

As Ulrica appeared alone in the doorway, gloveless, fanless, and obviously greatly disturbed, there was first a pause of astonishment, followed by a rush forward of the

three black figures and the offer of three arms. Ulrica, looking beyond, recognised Charlotte, who was watching the scene with strained attention, and immediately she laid her hand within Mr. Rockingham's arm.

'So you decided for "Yes," after all,' she said, over her shoulder, as she passed by Lady Nevvill's chair.

Charlotte made no reply. She was almost as pale still as she had been when Ulrica found her sitting at the foot of the bed that evening; and yet, despite the pinched look of her features, there was something almost like satisfaction in the glance which she kept fastened on Ulrica and Basil as long as they were within sight.

'Take me a turn through the rooms,' said Ulrica to Mr. Rockingham; 'I have had rather a fright, and I want to recover my breath.'

Mr. Rockingham acquiesced in silence.

'Do you know what it feels like,' she asked, with a harsh laugh, 'after having lost faith in God long ago, to lose faith in the devil as well? That is what has happened to me to-night.'

'You are excited,' said Mr. Rockingham, with a gentle smile; 'probably you don't mean that quite literally. Something has annoyed you, something perhaps that Lord Cannington said to you?' he added, as though struck by an idea.

'He asked me to marry him,' said Ulrica bluntly, yielding once more to that demon of recklessness which had possessed her all evening. 'That is annoying enough, is it not?'

Mr. Rockingham bit his lip, but he looked more ruffled than surprised.

'He must have been very awkward about it to upset you so,' was what he remarked.

The absence of astonishment was only a new astonishment to Ulrica. Was the thing, after all, not so very extraordinary, and was it only her ignorance that was at fault?

'Why, I wonder you don't ask me whether I accepted him or not?' she exclaimed, with a scornful curl of her lip.

'I am sure you did not,' said Mr. Rockingham, in a low voice.

‘Sure?’ and there was a ring of exasperation in her laugh. ‘How can any one be sure of anything? How can any one know whether he is standing on his head or on his heels in this mad world? What makes you so sure of anything concerning me?’

Had they been anywhere but in the midst of this crowd of eyes and ears, Mr. Rockingham would have liked best to answer: ‘Because I love you, and have every reason for supposing that my sentiments are returned.’ He had never had any very serious doubts regarding the success of his suit—he seldom had any doubts about anything he had once undertaken; but for all that, the new mark of favour which Ulrica had so openly accorded to him had caused his soul to leap for joy within him. Now would have been the moment for speech, but, alas! this was not the place. All the more annoying as every day was now precious, by reason of his leave having run very close to its end, and nothing but an extreme urgency of circumstances would move him to ask for a prolongation even of only a few days.

‘Does it strike you as strange,’ he replied, making the best of the situation, such as it was, ‘that whatever concerns you should be of interest to me? Am I not almost an old friend by this time?’

‘You have been a faithful cavalier,’ said Ulrica. ‘A useful sort of fetch-and-carry creature,’ was what she really thought.

‘I hope to be more some day,’ answered Mr. Rockingham, below his breath.

Ulrica glanced at him sideways, and saw that his eyes were hanging on her face, not diffidently precisely, for diffidence was a thing of which he was not capable, but yet with a question so eager as to be unmistakable. For the first time it flashed through her mind that this man possibly loved her. That he wished to marry her she had known for long, but never before had it occurred to her that all those smiles and glances which had had the express purpose of irritating Charlotte had succeeded in striking something like fire in the breast of this thick-skinned egotist.

Her hand slipped from his arm. 'I think I see some people over there I must talk to,' she said hurriedly. They had reached the arch of ice which marked the approach to the skating-tank, and Ulrica moved away among the crowd.

'Only a fit of girlish shyness,' muttered Mr. Rockingham to himself as he looked after her. 'This place is too public, I shall try my luck to-morrow.'

Ulrica had not gone many steps when her attention was once more arrested by the same round-faced old lady who had struck her as so incongruous while seated among the fashionably attired dowagers. She was standing now by the side of the skating-tank, and the three fluffy white wraps hung over her arm. A good many curious glances were directed towards her, and a good deal of tittering went on behind fans, yet she stood there absolutely unaware of the notice she was exciting, her attention divided between the three Miss Whites and their wraps, which she was very careful not to crush, and the fringes of which evidently gave her some anxiety from the propensity they possessed of getting entangled with any other fringe which in the crowd around her came in momentary collision with them. She must be sixty, at least, thought Ulrica, as she gazed with a curious fascination at the round, kindly face, faintly pink and softly wrinkled, somewhat like a long-dried rose. There were wrinkles enough in the room, God knows, but few of them were venerable and many of them were premature; the smile that has been smiled too often leaves its mark as well as the tear that has flowed too hotly;—but here was a face on which the wrinkles had come as wrinkles *should* come, by the sheer force of time and by the unavoidable anxiety of life.

While Ulrica moved about talking to her guests, her gaze continually wandered back to the short, black figure with its expression of patient waiting. More than once she found the kindly old eyes fixed upon her. There was nothing obtrusive in the gaze, and yet the consciousness of it weighed upon the girl. At last there came a moment when, their eyes having met for the fifth or sixth time, Ulrica, acting on a sudden irresistible impulse, stepped up to

where she stood alone, still waiting for the three Miss Whites.

‘Have you anything to say to me?’ she asked, with a touch of impatience. ‘Why do you look at me?’

‘Because you are so beautiful and look so unhappy,’ replied the old lady, and looked up in Ulrica’s face with a mixture of confidence and compassion that was very nearly irresistible. It was at this moment that the vague memory awakened by her first glimpse of this strange guest suddenly assumed a distinct shape. If she had not known that Pater Sepp had just been Pater Sepp, and that, moreover, he lay buried in the Glockenau churchyard, it might almost have been the eyes of the old priest into which she was looking. There was no other resemblance either in feature or colouring, it was nothing but the eyes with their faded blue and their look of unlimited benevolence which recalled her old protector. Her heart tightened with a pang, and yet she would not yield. Her mood was too hard to be softened by a mere memory.

‘Unhappy?’ she repeated, throwing up her head. ‘What a preposterous idea! If you had watched me you would have seen that I have been laughing and talking all evening, enjoying myself immensely all the time. Have I not everything that I can possibly want?’

‘I have watched you,’ said the old lady gently, ‘and I don’t know what it is that is wanting to you. I would help you if I only knew how, poor child.’ By this time her hand in its one-buttoned glove was softly patting Ulrica’s fingers, and a little moisture had sprung to the eyes that were so like those of Pater Sepp.

Ulrica sharply withdrew her hand, and without another word turned on her heel. ‘Poor child!’ Was it actually to *her* that those words had been applied by that old woman?

The feeling of indignant resistance to an influence she would not acknowledge remained with Ulrica until, the last guest having departed, she found herself in the solitude of her own room. The candles burned on the table, but through the chinks of the closed shutters the rising sun was shooting out its first shafts. Ulrica, her white robes still flowing around her, the diamonds still flashing in her hair,

stood in the middle of the room, casting a glance backwards over the events of the evening. The ice-feast had been a complete success; not even the most envious tongue could pick a hole in the fabric of this triumph. The night that had just ended would be spoken of for years.

She moved across the room. On a chair beside the bed lay an open newspaper, just as she had flung it down last night. 'Letters from a Pine Forest,' the heading once more met her eye. She turned away impatiently, then in the same minute she flung herself down in all her ice-queen splendour on her knees beside the bed. What was it that that man had said to-night? The world bright and warm. Her beautiful arms were flung over the bed, her face buried in the coverlet. 'O Gilbert!' she muttered, with dry eyes and burning lips. 'O my cousin! This bright world is so dark, this warm world is so cold without you, my cousin, my cousin!'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CHEESLEY VILLAS.

FAR, very far away from the resorts of fashionable life there exists a street, one of many of its kind, which calls itself by the dreary and significant title of Cheesley Villas. Everybody who knows a certain district of the outskirts of London knows what that means: a row of buildings desperately attempting to be ornamental cottages, and succeeding only in being gimcrack lodging-houses, endowed with the shallowest of bow-windows, the flimsiest of porticoes, and the meagrest of stucco ornaments, standing generally in a garden newly laid out, in which the tallest shrub would scarcely afford cover to an ordinary barn-door fowl. According to the advertisements, the chief attraction of these residences, built by a speculative builder whose name presumably was Cheesley, consisted in the happy combination of town and country life which they offered; and it was generally not until bound by an irrevocable con-

tract that the victims discovered that they were neither in town nor in the country, but rather, while suffering the disadvantages of both, enjoyed the advantages of neither.

In No. 8 of these villas (they were not otherwise individualised) luncheon, or rather a species of luncheon-dinner, was going on on the 25th of June. It was a lively luncheon-table, if not a particularly well-stocked one, with representatives of all ages drawn close around it, and a wagging of tongues which rivalled the clattering of plates.

‘Granny, my napkin’s got untied, what am I to do?’

‘Immediately, Tommy dear, I will tie it for you.’

‘Granny, me wants some more puddin’.’

‘Yes, my pet, you shall have it. Pass your plate, like a good child; and don’t you think, dear, you might stop kicking Sammy’s legs?’ This not in an admonishing tone, but rather in one which implied that the cessation of operations on Sammy’s legs would be considered as a great and personal favour to the speaker.

‘Mammy, do be such an angel and cut me a slice of bread; it’s near you, and nobody cuts bread as you do.’

‘And for me too, Auntie!’

‘Granny, my puddin’s too hot, I wants you to blow on it!’

‘Immediately, my dears, immediately!’

The person thus appealed to by big and little was a small old lady with a round face and white hair combed smoothly over her ears. Except that her dress was of a black woollen stuff instead of silk, and except that the want of a night’s rest was painfully visible in the dimness of her kindly blue eyes, Mrs. Meades in the circle of her family looked exactly as she had looked at the ice-ball last night. The miscellaneous family party collected round the table consisted not only of grandchildren and children, but likewise of various nieces and a cousin or two, partly residents in No. 8 and partly unceremonious guests, who knew by experience that there would always be a little of the hashed beef and rice-pudding over for any member of the family who chose to drop in at this hour.

When she had tied Tommy’s napkin, supplied the desired slices of bread, and blown upon little Polly’s pudding to

the satisfaction of that young lady, Mrs. Meades gazed round the table to see what more she could do. There being no very obvious wants to supply, she cheerfully set about creating some by inquiring in an insinuating voice whether there was nobody who wanted an apple peeled? Upon which half-a-dozen 'I's!' were shrieked out by the younger members of the party, as a result of which not even the tiniest morsel found its way into her own mouth.

'Mammy really is too bad,' observed the mother of the small apple-eaters, a loud-voiced, somewhat boisterous lady; 'by rights the dessert should not have been on the table to-day; Tommy did not know a line of his lessons, and Phil broke a window-pane this morning through sheer naughtiness.'

'I think I can explain about the window-pane,' said Mrs. Meades eagerly. 'I don't think myself that it was quite Phil's fault. That ball he was playing with has such an awkward way of—'

'All right, all right!' laughed Mrs. Buller, the daughter, making a feint of putting her hands to her ears. 'We all know the sort of thing that is coming. I am sure you have an equally good explanation ready to account for the blank in Tommy's memory. You must know,' and she turned to her neighbour, a distant cousin, who was a comparative stranger in the family circle, 'that to be accused of anything by anybody is enough to gain Mammy as an advocate and defender. Something in her constitution makes it morally and physically impossible for her to sit by and listen in silence to anybody's character being pulled to pieces. The circumstances of the case may be absolutely strange to her, but that is no objection to her finding a loophole for the culprit. He didn't mean it—that is always her last refuge. If a murderer were taken red-handed in the deed, she would still persist in clinging to the belief that the poor man had not *meant* it.'

'As for me,' remarked another member of the party, 'I have long ago decided that the only comfortable place when the day of judgment comes will be close by Auntie's side. I can positively see her moving from foot to foot while the list of my sins is being run over by that terrible

angel with the trumpet, and the very moment he has done, I can hear her beginning in her most insinuating voice: "Dear Mr. Angel, I think I can explain all that."

'Splendid! I claim the place at the other side!' cried another.

'And where are we to stand, then?' clamoured several voices. 'Who will explain away the items on our list?'

'What nonsense you girls do talk,' said Mrs. Meades, smiling a gently delighted smile all the same, as, the apples being disposed of, she busied herself in distributing some home-made and rather singed sponge-cakes among her grandchildren.

'Sponge-cakes as well as apples,' sighed Mrs. Buller resignedly. 'And I don't believe you have eaten a morsel of dessert yourself. It all comes from that ridiculous expedition last night. You're too tired to eat. Nobody but you would think of sacrificing their night's rest to such a lanky, colourless trio as those White girls.'

'But I assure you, my dear, that they are not so *very* plain, after all; Ada had quite a pretty colour last night, and Nelly.'

There was a burst of laughter all round the table.

'There you are at it again,' said Mrs. Buller, almost roughly, gazing at her mother the while with undisguised adoration. 'You'll be explaining away the lankiness presently, and will end in all but convincing us that the three Miss Whites are three beauties unappreciated. I should be ashamed of myself, if I were they, keeping respectable old ladies out of their beds, just in order to be able to display those peaky shoulders of theirs.'

'But it's just the old women that should make themselves useful,' interposed Mrs. Meades eagerly. 'It's not much we can do, after all. We are no good for conversation, for our memories are generally weak; we are no good for any physical exertion, as our legs are mostly weaker still than our memories; we are not pretty to look at.'

'But you are *lovely* to look at!' came at once in an indignant chorus from big and little. 'Oo's the bootifullest pusson I've ever seed!' shrieked Polly, with an energy as fierce as though she were challenging mankind at large to

deny the assertion. Granny was surrounded in a moment, clambered upon, and half strangled by small arms and all but smothered in protesting kisses. The hubbub was at its very height when a sharp ring at the door-bell startled everybody back into more conventional behaviour. The sound of approaching wheels had been drowned in the clamour of indignation.

'Such a bootiful lady in such a bootiful cawage!' announced the mobile Polly, who had already darted to the window.

'Dear me, then I suppose I had better retire in case I should be put quite into the shade,' said Mrs. Meades, still laughing gently, as with cap all awry and her smooth white hair somewhat roughened, she extricated herself from the hands of her grandsons, and hastily made for the nearest door.

It was in the nursery that she took refuge; she had remembered that there was a hole to darn in Phil's stocking.

But Phil's stocking was not destined to be darned that day, for scarcely had Mrs. Meades threaded her needle when the door was burst open by the owner of the stocking, who announced with becoming clamour that Granny was wanted immediately in the parlour, as the beautiful lady in the beautiful carriage had come expressly to see her and would speak to no one else.

For a minute Granny stood stupefied, with her hands still thrust into the stocking she was examining. Then, quickly recovering herself, she smoothed her hair and went downstairs. Somebody wanted her, that was enough.

When Mrs. Meades, in her noiseless way, slipped in by the parlour door, she found herself confronted by a tall young lady, dressed in fashionable attire, who stood in the middle of the room. The beautiful face was almost colourless, and the great grey eyes ringed round with black. It was the 'ice-queen' of last night. Mrs. Meades uttered an exclamation of mingled surprise and pleasure, and advanced with both hands outstretched.

'My dear, how good of you to come and see an old woman like me!' Then, as she saw her visitor's face

nearer, she quickly added: 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

There was no immediate response. Ulrica neither grasped the outstretched hand nor moved from the spot on which she was standing. Her black brows were drawn together and her lips tightly set.

'I have come,' she said at last, slowly, 'because I wanted to ask you what you meant yesterday. I got your address from Mrs. White. What makes you fancy that I am not happy?'

There was defiance in the voice, but in the eyes hungrily fixed on the face before her there was a fierce, eager question.

'I cannot tell you what first gave me the idea, my dear child, but from the moment I saw you I felt sure that there is something amissing in your life. I would give it you so gladly if I could!'

A spasm passed over Ulrica's face; for an instant her brows were drawn yet more severely together. In the next, already the struggle was over; covering her face with her hands, she burst into a passion of tears.

Without losing any further time, Mrs. Meades took her visitor's unresisting hand and led her to a sofa, crying the while too, for company's sake. And then they sat down, side by side, the little old woman and the tall young one, and presently Ulrica, still sobbing as though her heart would break, felt soft arms round her, and after a brief resistance allowed her head to sink down upon a willing, motherly shoulder. The vehemence of her passion of grief shook her from head to foot, and yet in the flow of these tears there was an unspeakable relief. It was as though a torturing band were burst at last, a load lifted which for weeks and months had pressed upon her unbearably.

'You are right,' she gasped through her tears, 'nobody has guessed it but you; I am unhappy, oh, nobody knows how unhappy I am! He played falsely with me, he has spoilt my whole life.'

'But perhaps, my dear,' whispered the old lady, 'he did not mean it. Perhaps it may all come right yet.'

'He is dead,' answered Ulrica, with her face still hidden.

Mrs. Meades did not answer this time, only there was a little tightening of the fingers which she had clasped round Ulrica's hot hand. She had gone through great and terrible griefs herself; she had buried children and stood beside a husband's grave, and she knew that there are moments in which words are of no avail.

'I don't myself understand what made me come to you,' said Ulrica, raising her head again after a long pause; 'I think it is because you remind me of somebody I once knew—an old man who was kind to me.'

'You couldn't have done anything that pleased me better,' replied Mrs. Meades in genuine delight. 'Yes, Sammy dear, what is it?' for at that moment Sammy's head was pushed in through the door.

'Granny, where's that string you promised me for my top?'

'One moment, my dear,' and trotting off to a table at the end of the room, she produced out of a drawer a discarded cigar-box in which every morsel of twine off every parcel that entered the house was religiously stored for emergencies like this. There was a quite similar box alongside, devoted to tissue-paper, acquired in the same manner and carefully smoothed out of its original creases.

'They are so used to come to me when their mother is busy,' she explained apologetically, as she returned to Ulrica's side. 'We keep so few servants that—'

Here once more the door was opened, this time to admit Polly, who walked in quite decorously with a message from her mamma. Her baby sister, Ella, Polly reported, had fallen down and bumped her head, and absolutely refused either to be comforted or to have her forehead bathed unless Granny and just Granny and nobody but Granny held the sponge. Would the 'bootiful' lady, therefore, do without Granny for just five minutes?

With a deprecating glance Mrs. Meades slipped from the room exactly as she had slipped into it.

By the time she rejoined her visitor the latter had partly regained her composure. She had dried her eyes and pushed up her veil, though her lips still quivered with the violence of her sobs.

‘Is it because you have not got your hands full enough already,’ asked Ulrica, with an unsteady smile, ‘that you go out of your way to take an interest in strangers?’

Mrs. Meades’ hand went up as though to close Ulrica’s mouth.

‘Hush! That is a word I don’t understand. Why need any of us be strangers to the other?’

‘But,’ persisted Ulrica, ‘I am nothing to you, you know nothing of me, and yet from the moment I set eyes on you I felt that you had guessed half my secret.’

Mrs. Meades shook her head. ‘The guessing is easy enough, if only I could help you, my poor child!’

‘You have helped me already; let me only sit here and talk to you and look at you; I cannot explain how it is, but you rest me and you cool me—and I am so tired, oh, my God, and the pain in my heart is so hot!’

And thus it came about that while far away in the West End carriage after carriage rolled up to the door of Countess Eldringen’s mansion only to be met with the information that she was not at home, and while even Mrs. Byrd was racking her brain as to whither her charge could have taken herself, the missing heiress was quietly ensconced at No. 8 of Cheesley Villas, sitting on a sofa that was covered with the very cheapest of cretonnes, and drinking two-shilling tea out of a slightly chipped teacup.

Sometimes the illusion of last night would come over Ulrica again, and it would seem to be Pater Sepp to whom she was speaking. Surely this old woman and that old man had been fashioned of the same stuff, only that of the two she was the richer by those quick instincts of a woman’s nature, those refinements of an educated mind which the man and the peasant had necessarily lacked. In the catholicity of their sympathies they were alike, but hers was that wider range of vision which the woman who has been a wife and a mother cannot fail to have gained in the school of life. She might have been the female complement of Pater Sepp, ‘the one half of him,’ as Ulrica said to herself, with something between a smile and a sigh.

When the whole of the story had been told, there was a long silence in the room.

‘Tell me,’ said Ulrica, with her chin resting on her clasped hands and her eyes on the pattern of the shabby carpet, ‘is there anything I could live for? Is not dying the next best thing to being happy?’

‘No, I do not think so,’ said Mrs. Meades meditatively.

‘What is, then? Have you any other recipe for making life possible?’

Mrs. Meades moved restlessly and began to smooth out the front breadth of her skirt.

‘There is always the chance of making other people happy,’ she suggested, almost shamefacedly. ‘I don’t like bothering people with my advice, and I don’t think that old women have any right to preach to young ones just because they happen to have been born forty years earlier, but—’ and her voice dropped almost to a whisper—‘there is so much misery in the world, and you have so much money.’

Ulrica looked up with great, startled eyes. The words brought back to her mind other words spoken by herself, in what seemed to her an immeasurably distant past. Long-buried thoughts stirred again and rose out of the grave in which negligence, forgetfulness, and the hurry and cares of the life she had led for months past had cast them. The very first conversation she had had with Gilbert in the forest returned to her memory. The money had been his then, not hers; but it was she who had so severely condemned the rich who lay their hands in their laps and allow the good things of the earth to come to them unasked; it was she who had attempted to spur his failing ambition in the cause of philanthropy. What had become of her own ambition now?

Then all at once, as in a vision, a picture sprung up before the eye of her fancy—a dark, hideous picture, full of the agonies of starvation and of the gloom of poverty-stricken dirt. How was it that he had called it, that unhappy street, the abode of misery from which the possessors of the Nevill fortune drew a not inconsiderable portion of their yearly income? Not once since she had breathed London air had the ghastly vision of Dark Street arisen to dim her enjoyment of the hour.

She made no answer to Mrs. Meades’ last remark, but,

having sat for some minutes plunged in deep thought, she got suddenly to her feet and began to look about her for her parasol. An irrepressible desire for immediate action had come over her.

'Have I frightened you away?' asked Mrs. Meades anxiously. 'I didn't mean to give you a sermon, I really didn't; it's a thing I never do, I only meant—'

'You have given me something much better than a sermon,' said Ulrica, drawing a deep breath; 'you have given me back my belief in human nature. The world can't be quite bad, after all, when there are people like you in it.'

Then, just after turning to go, she stooped and kissed the soft, withered cheek of the little old lady.

Among the many curious problems of life not the least curious is the consideration of how there are lives that run side by side for years without ever touching, and how there are others which, starting from points which seem to lie world-wide asunder, come to cross each other at some period, perhaps only for one brief moment, yet often bearing away from that passing contact an impression that is never to die. Until yesterday Ulrica had never seen the woman to whom she had opened her heart, possibly she might never see her again, she knew nothing of her, scarcely even who she was; yet that afternoon spent in No. 8 of Cheesley Villas would always remain a landmark in her life.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DARK STREET.

It was too late to do anything that day, despite the impulse that was pushing her to action. Ulrica, on leaving No. 8, was forced to recognise this. The expedition to Dark Street, which she had resolved on already as the first obvious thing to do, must necessarily be postponed till tomorrow. When next day came she had to wait till the afternoon for the execution of her project, for it was not

till then that Mrs. Byrd could conveniently be got rid of, and Ulrica felt a strange reluctance to confide in her talkative chaperon. That lady having at length started on a shopping expedition, Ulrica lost no further time in having a hansom called.

Her difficulty began the moment she left her own door. She had given the preference to the hansom partly because she wished to excite as little notice as possible, and partly because she surmised that the hansom driver would be more intimate with the topography of the East End of London than the respectable old family coachman was likely to be. But even the hansom driver looked baffled when told to drive to Dark Street. A London cabby is not easy to baffle, and is most reluctant to acknowledge that he is baffled; but, having repeatedly searched his memory, this particular cabby was compelled to acknowledge that, not to put too fine a point upon the matter, he was blessed if he knew where Dark Street was.

'It is somewhere in the East End, that is all I know,' said Ulrica impatiently. 'Drive in that direction, and you can ask your way further on.'

'Somewhere in the Heast Hend, and that's all she knows,' repeated cabby to himself as he reflectively turned his horse; 'and she all by herself, and that swell—well, this is a rummy go.'

They had only just got into motion when another hansom, coming from the opposite direction, passed them close. Ulrica just saw its occupant bending forward quickly with his face towards her, but she had not time to recognise Mr. Rockingham.

Mr. Rockingham, however, had caught a glimpse of her face, and after a movement of disappointment and a short moment of hesitation, he directed his driver to follow the first hansom. Yesterday he had been disappointed in the same way, having been one of the visitors met with the information that the Countess was not at home. To the others this might appear a matter of small moment, but for him the question of finding Ulrica at home or not at home was fast becoming a serious one, and this for the simple reason that there remained only three days of his leave.

By calling a little after tea-time he had hoped to secure the interview he wanted, and seeing himself disappointed in this, and being a man of a decided turn of mind, he immediately determined to follow her, on the chance of yet gaining the wished-for opportunity.

It could not well be shopping, thought Mr. Rockingham, as, after both Bond Street and Regent Street had been crossed, the hansom still held on its eastward direction. It must be a call, though he could not imagine on whom; could she possibly have business in the city? They were in the very thick of the Strand by this time, and Mr. Rockingham, not willing to trust to his driver's eyes alone, endeavoured to make assurance doubly sure by sitting well forward and keeping his gaze nailed to the hansom in advance. The precaution, however, was superfluous, for this cabby had likewise had a glimpse of the other cabby's fare, and being of a youthful and enterprising turn of mind himself, nothing seemed to him more natural than that a swell with such a magnificent carnation in his buttonhole, and so obviously decked out for conquest, should be unwilling to lose sight of that 'real beauty' on ahead. So settling himself well in his seat and touching up his willing chestnut, he prepared to show what a London cabby can do.

In and out of the monstrous labyrinth of vehicles of every description did he wind, not only with the wisdom but also with the sinuosity of the serpent, allowing no stoppage to baffle him and no intervening obstacles to confuse his vision. They were still hot on the scent when Cannon Street was reached. 'Can she be leaving town?' thought Mr. Rockingham, for the theory of 'business' was becoming every moment more unlikely. But the station was passed, and the word was still eastward and ever eastward. Not more than a hundred yards beyond the station there was a pull-up. Mr. Rockingham leant out eagerly.

'Not yet, sir,' came from the sympathetic driver, 'it's axin' of his way.' In another minute they were off again, heading straight for Whitechapel. Mr. Rockingham leant back with a puzzled look on his face. Of course an am-

bassador does not, even in his most private thoughts, use such expressions as a 'rummy go,' but in point of fact the whole thing appeared to him quite as mysterious as it had appeared to Ulrica's driver.

At the entrance to the High Street the second pull-up occurred. It was a policeman who was being interrogated this time. In another minute they had left the main line and had plunged into a maze of narrow streets.

Ulrica, with ever-growing impatience, peered out of each window alternately. Was there no end at all to this terrible London? Corner after corner was turned, street after street was crossed, each one more squalid and more abandoned-looking than the last; their pace grew slower and slower, either because the driver was looking out for the names of the streets or because he did not feel keen about going on.

'What is it?' asked Ulrica, as they once more came to a standstill. 'Are we there at last?'

'Not quite, lady, we must be close, but—'

'But what?'

'Aren't you a bit afraid? They're a terrible looking lot all round here; knock you down and be off with your purse as soon as look at you. Are you quite sartin ye've got to get there to-day, lady?'

'Yes, I am quite certain. Drive on, and make haste.'

The next time the cabman drew up, he said, 'Here you are,' and without further remark sulkily lit his pipe. It was as much as though he had said, 'and I hope you like it now that you are here.'

Ulrica on descending found herself in a narrow, wretchedly paved street of which one side was almost entirely taken up by the blank wall of a factory, while opposite to it a public-house of the lowest description displayed its blistered signboard. She looked about her doubtfully; there were few people visible in the almost deserted street. A woman who was staggering out of the public-house with a mug in her hand, and to whom she addressed herself, stared at her with the vacant gaze of semi-drunkenness.

'It'll be the courts ye're after,' she managed to utter, waving her mug towards a low archway under the dilapidated house which stood beside the public-house.

Ulrica, without further hesitation, turned and passed under the arch. It proved to be the entrance to a court or so-called alley, about ten feet in width, with tall, shallow, many-windowed, damp-streaked houses on each side—one of many of its kind, for Dark Street consisted in reality of a great block of houses, which had originally been a hollow square containing either gardens or yards, the ground of which, however, had been gradually built closely over as space grew more valuable—a perfect maze within a maze. The particular court into which Ulrica chanced was a fair specimen of its fellows. Once upon a time it had been paved, but stone after stone had been broken up until the whole was riddled with holes, which on this warm summer day were simply reservoirs of dust, but in which the water must necessarily stand in great puddles after every shower. Despite the limited space between the houses, the inhabitants were evidently of opinion that they still had more room than they required, for they had choked it up still further with such things as broken wheelbarrows, old timber, and rubbish of every description. Out of some windows linen had been hung to dry, while almost every third or fourth pane was smashed, the gap being sometimes filled up with a bundle of rags thrust into the vacant square. At the far end of the court one or two people were lounging at the doors, and close to the entrance a small boy in rags, with a shrunken, haggard face, was revelling in the dust-bin, in which he had plunged both his meagre arms.

‘Can you tell me whom these houses belong to?’ asked Ulrica of the lad, since he was the nearest person at hand. She asked it with a beating heart, having already begun to dread the answer.

He looked up at her with his bead-like eyes staring out of his old-man’s face, but evidently was too astonished to answer. Clutching a piece of stale fish he had just discovered in the dust-bin, he scuttled away with his prize into the nearest doorway, like a rat into its hole.

Ulrica turned resolutely the same way, determined to know the worst at once. The first thing she experienced on plunging into the dark, yawning passage-way was an almost intolerable sense of suffocation. The air in the

court had been intensely close, but it was purity itself compared to the foul atmosphere which met her here. Though it was still broad daylight outside, it was here so dark that Ulrica only just saved herself from stumbling headlong down a flight of stone steps. She felt for the bannister; there was none—it had been broken away long ago, burnt as fire-wood, most likely. Steadying herself by the wall on the other side, she made her way down the broken steps, rounded by the long-hardened mud upon them. Beside her the plaster rattled down with a hollow, startling sound. Was it indeed possible that human beings lived down there? That they breathed this air habitually?

At the bottom of the stairs she came upon a door, and having knocked and knocked again in vain, she opened it, or rather pushed it open, for there was no vestige either of handle or lock remaining. In one corner of the underground kitchen a black mass was lying, barely discernible in the dim light. The furniture of this kitchen consisted of two hampers, round one of which, turned bottom uppermost and serving as table, seven or eight peaky children were grouped.

‘Is there any one here?’ asked Ulrica, looking towards the black mass. It stirred and partially sat up.

‘What’s it next?’ growled a tipsily drowsy voice. ‘Ye haven’t come for the rent, have ye? ’Tain’t Monday night.’

‘No, I haven’t come for the rent. I want to know whom these houses belong to. Can you tell me?’

‘Lord knows—some ’owling swell, no doubt,’ and the woman fell back again like a sack into her former prostrate position. It was nothing but the idea of the rent which could have succeeded in rousing her even for that instant.

Ulrica turned and fled up the stairs again; but it was only to mount still higher and hastily to examine the rest of the house. Her head was beginning to swim. She had thought that she had known poverty before; misery and starvation were things with which she had believed herself intimate; but never had she pictured to herself such horror as this. What was the wretchedness of the poorest peasant at Glockenau compared to this abyss of squalor? Yet she

forced herself to push forward. The upper staircases were not much better lighted than the lower one had been, owing to the windows being plastered over thickly with cobwebs of several years' standing; every now and then Ulrica's foot slipped upon some carrot or potato paring which she had failed to observe. Here also most of the bannisters were gone. Door after door was knocked at and opened, sometimes disclosing an empty room with a few scattered articles on the floor; more often the dilapidated hole would be occupied by some of the most terrible specimens of humanity upon whom Ulrica had ever set eyes. All the men that were sober enough were still out at their work, which—if it was not pocket-picking—was generally that of a costermonger or a scavenger, and it was to this circumstance alone that Ulrica owed the comparative immunity with which she was able to carry through her mad expedition, for very few of the abandoned wretches were in a condition even to lift their heads from their pillows of straw or rags. And what terrible heads there were reared in the dark corners. What glimpses of blood-shot eyes and swollen features! It was like hurrying through a gallery in which one horrible picture crowded the other out of sight. In that breathless half-hour she turned red and pale in each minute—red with shame at the sights which met her eyes, pale with the disgust and fear awakened by the awful words that fell upon her ear.

From an old woman lying in bed all alone in an attic room she at length got the information she wanted, or rather the information of that which she already knew. Yes, these courts were part of the Nevyl property; she had never seen the person to whom they belonged, but she believed he was a baronet. This old woman, who was evidently slowly dying, presented a strange contrast to her surroundings. The sheets between which she lay were the first clean things Ulrica had seen since she entered the house. The wretched room itself showed signs of care which spoke of an almost superhuman love of order, for it truly required to be that to have survived in such a place: the broken grate had been bound up with bits of wire; the tattered wall-paper patched with strips of printed matter;

the one whole and the two broken mugs, which apparently formed the whole stock of crockery, were neatly ranged on a shelf against the wall. Altogether the room and the woman were like a solitary scrap of decency which some caprice of Fate had patched on to the rest of the disreputable fabric.

‘I knew the baronet you speak of,’ said Ulrica in answer to her remark, as she sat down wearily on the wooden stool which was the only seat in the room, for her knees were now so trembling with excitement and fatigue that she could no longer stand.

‘You know him? O lor’, miss,’ quavered the dying woman, ‘if you’re a friend of his, you might get him to do the one thing that my heart’s still set upon in this world. Perhaps he might think me exacting, but if you’re a friend of his—’

‘What is it you want done?’

She looked down and picked nervously at her patch-work coverlet. ‘You see, miss, I’m dying—I don’t myself expect to see this day fortnight’s sun, and that man alongside do beat his wife so awful. Do you think it would be over-exacting if I asked to be moved to another room where I couldn’t hear her scream? Maybe the gentleman might think me a bit particular, but it’s just on account of having the last fortnight quiet. The door there, for instance, it was with her head that he drove that panel in the other night, and of course I hear things plainer than ever now through the hole. I don’t mind the baby’s crying, nor yet when Mrs. O’Fadge there at the other side comes home drunk and smashes up her tables and chairs; but it’s that woman’s screams. Do you think anything can be done about having me moved? Do you think it’s asking too much?’ and she raised her haggard, wistful eyes to Ulrica’s face.

‘No, I don’t think it is asking too much,’ said Ulrica, with a somewhat grim smile.

‘And you will speak to the gentleman about it?’

‘I can’t do that, he is dead.’ Then upon some impulse she added: ‘He died last year; I am his cousin, the houses belong to me now.’

'To you? O lor', miss, and me speaking so free. But God bless your pretty face, I believe you'll do it for me.'

'And me, if you plaze? What's to be done for me?' said a thick voice behind Ulrica. Turning her head sharply, she became aware of a gaunt giantess standing in the doorway of the room which the sick woman in the bed had indicated as belonging to 'Mrs. O'Fadge.'

'What's to be done for me, I ask ye? The houses are yourn, are they? Then shure it's ye as'll have to mend my winders and stop up the holes in the wall, my foine lady. I won't be put off any longer; look here, my name's Maroia O'Fadge, and I swear by all the foires in hell that ye sha'n't go down the staircase till ye've promised to put things straight. Look here, I say,' and seizing Ulrica by the wrist with the grip of a female Hercules, she dragged her into the next room. Her white hair was hanging tangled on her shoulders, and her dress fell apart upon her withered bosom. 'Indade, it's a pretty place for a Christian Oirish woman as pays two and saix a week to live in, hi? Och, never ye be afeard, me deary, it's not near so bad when the sun's a-shoinin' as it is in the dark when the moice are scampering after each ither. D'ye see that rotten place in the floor? That's where the watter drips through in the winther-toime. And that hole in the wall, d'ye see it? That's where the wind and the rain comes through both summer and winter aloike. There, ye can feel it for yerself. Come along, me honey; shure ye have more of these illigent gloves at home, so never ye moind if these get sthained a bit,' and still holding Ulrica by the wrist, she forced her arm into a great crooked crack in the wall, which in point of fact went right through to the open air. 'Never moind that heap in the khornor, it's only me boy who's down with the faver. Shure it's strange that we should have such-loike things as faver and such a foine venthilation as we're blessed with up here, eh?' and with a laugh of a jackal she pointed to the gaping wall. 'Ah, the houses belong to ye, do they? Bless yer pretty face, indade! It's more loike cursin' that I feels.'

With a tremendous effort Ulrica wrenched herself free of the fingers which lay like a vice round her wrist, and

escaped into the passage panting and pale. She had seen enough for to-day; she had seen more than she wanted.

It was almost at a run that she reached the open air. But immediately she was forced to slacken her pace. It was close to sunset now, and within the last half-hour the narrow court had become thronged. All day long the sun had been glaring down upon the houses until they had become unbearable. One by one the lodgers had been driven out, and now, on every doorstep, hot, dirty women were sitting and quarrelling; while hot, dirty children crawled over the yet hotter stones. Shrill scoldings and frightful oaths echoed back from wall to wall, and everybody looked as though they had placed themselves there for the sole purpose of being in everybody else's way. All this at the bottom of what might have been a well of stones, while only far, far above the quarrelsome heads the last rays of the setting sun caught the side of a red chimney and for a brief moment made it almost beautiful.

Ulrica had scarcely issued from the doorway, stood still and looked around her with a shiver of disgust. The place was infinitely more dreary and depressing now with its overflowing life than it had been in its deserted state. The dust of the long summer day mingled with the gin- and brandy-tainted breaths combined to make the atmosphere well-nigh stupefying. Ulrica thought of her ice-feast, of the sums of money spent upon the artificial coolness of those few hours, and unconsciously she hung her head. Then, meeting the astonished gaze of one of the crawling children, she half turned backwards with the instinctive wish to remain unnoticed. But it was too late. Already other eyes were turned her way; in the next minute curious faces began to gather round her; children plucked at her gown and whined for pennies, the women exchanged audible comments upon her hat and upon her parasol, and fixed greedy eyes on the silver handle of her parasol. Presently a whisper flew like wildfire round the court,—from the attic downwards the report had spread that the proprietress of the houses was somewhere about. Immediately every doorstep was abandoned, and Ulrica found herself in the centre of an ever-thickening crowd. Men's faces appeared among the women's, for it

was the hour of home-coming; old hags bent crooked came hobbling upon sticks out of the doorways, blinking their eyes in the daylight, like some hideous sort of night-birds that are used to live in the darkness. The clamour increased tenfold. Every long-stored-up grievance was dragged noisily to the light. Some one whimpered for a reduction of rent, some one else shrieked for a new grate. A man's voice threateningly demanded something to drink her health in, and on the spot all grievances were forgotten and 'somethin' to drink yer 'ealth in' became the general cry.

With pale face and set teeth Ulrica looked around her for some means of escape. Not until this moment had she grasped the extent of her own temerity. The people were pressing ever closer upon her, the voices were growing more threatening, she could feel that some one had hold of her parasol, a stale cabbage-stalk hit her on the shoulder.

'Cowards!' she flamed out, with flashing eyes, but in the same moment already there was a swaying in the crowd, and all at once Mr. Rockingham, appearing from she knew not where, had forced his way through by the sheer strength of his elbows, and, having reached her side, faced round towards the rabble.

'Out of the way,' he shouted, squaring his fists. 'There's a policeman just round that corner. He'll come if I whistle, and I give you my word that I'll whistle unless you let the lady pass this very minute.'

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the people began to move slowly and sulkily aside.

'Thank you, oh, thank you,' whispered Ulrica, clinging to Mr. Rockingham's arm. She had taken hold of it without being quite aware of what she was doing. Without his help she could scarcely have walked steadily to the street.

'May I drive with you?' he asked, when he had helped her into his own hansom.

'Certainly,' said Ulrica, with nervous eagerness. 'Oh, you *must* drive with me, I cannot let you go.'

Mr. Rockingham stepped in after her, suppressing a smile of keen satisfaction.

‘Do you know that that was an insane thing to do?’ he presently remarked.

‘I know; but it had to be done.’

He relapsed into thoughtful silence. At the bottom of his heart he was very much shocked at the whole proceeding, for to see the *convenances* disregarded was always a very painful thing to him; but, after all, nothing could have been luckier for him than the way the afternoon had shaped itself. If only the hansom had not rattled so abominably he would undoubtedly have struck his blow now while the iron of her gratitude was yet hot; but a shouted proposal had many drawbacks to it, and more especially so when the person into whose ears it has to be shouted is lying back with closed eyes, and a great mental lassitude expressed in every line of her face and figure. There was nothing to do but to possess his soul in patience for yet another day.

‘Shall I find you at home to-morrow?’ he inquired, as, after a long and almost silent drive, they drew up before the house in Park Lane.

‘To-morrow?’ she said, awaking as though out of a dream. ‘Yes, of course you will find me at home. I shall try and thank you to-morrow; to-day I am too tired even to think.’

She gave him her hand as they stood on the pavement, straight under the drawing-room windows, then, entering the house, she slowly mounted the stairs.

‘I must get away, I must rest,’ she kept saying to herself, as she dragged her heavy feet upward.

Until to-day the strain of the last two months seemed to have left her physical strength untouched; now, all at once, the measure showed itself to be full. A desperate lassitude, bodily and mental, had seized upon her. In a confused way she felt that the evil that waited to be grappled with was one of too deep-rooted a sort to be lightly attacked. She must get to some place where she could order her thoughts and gather her strength for the work. Just now she felt too sick at heart to form even a plan. But away from here—she certainly must go away.

So taken up was she with the idea in her mind, that it

was only when she reached the top of the stairs that she noticed Charlotte standing before the drawing-room door, with the train of her tea-gown gathered in one hand and her eyes fixed full on the advancing figure. Her face was colourless and her lips trembling. Though she did not speak immediately, it was so evident that she had something to say that Ulrica instinctively stood still.

Charlotte had been looking terribly ill for the last few days, having caught cold at the ice-ball, but seen thus in the gathering dusk, the effect was positively ghostly.

'I saw you,' she panted in a whisper, 'I saw you from the window.'

'I daresay you did,' said Ulrica indifferently; 'what of that?'

'It is of no use saying he was not there, I saw you both, I tell you.'

'I suppose you are talking of Mr. Rockingham?'

'Do you deny that you came back with him now in that cab, alone?'

'No, I haven't the smallest intention of denying that. Do let me pass, like a good creature; it is really all I can do to reach my room.'

Instead of letting her pass, Charlotte bent forward, and, trembling with excitement, peered into Ulrica's face.

'And you think he will marry you?' she said almost in her ear, yet with a nervous intensity that was more startling than the loudest tone could have been. 'Do you think he will marry you? I tell you he will not. I will prevent him, I—I, do you hear? I can do it. He shall not marry you; rather than that—' she broke off and looked round her with a nervous shiver, as though not certain of what she had said, then, abruptly turning, disappeared through the door alongside, leaving the passage free.

Ulrica, having stood for a minute longer on the landing, shrugged her shoulders and pursued her way to her room.

There was a letter with the Morton postmark lying on her toilet-table. As she glanced through its contents a little of the fatigue left her face and a little interest came into it. Having laid down the paper, she rang for her maid.

'Pack up my things immediately,' was the order she gave, 'and tell Brownley to look out a train. I am going down to Morton to-morrow morning.'

'For good, mees?' the astonished maid could not refrain from gasping.

'Yes, for good. Don't lose any time.'

'But the dinner-pardi to-morrow, mees, and the dance the day after, and—'

'Do as I tell you,' said Ulrica imperiously, whereupon Mademoiselle Séraphine, feeling very much shaken, had no choice but to withdraw.

Ulrica took up the letter again and read it through more attentively. It was from Mr. Bolt, the engineer, and contained the brief announcement that he hoped to have the last gap in the sea-bank filled up on the following day. 'As you are aware from my last communication,' he wrote in his stiff, ungainly hand, 'we attacked the gaps five days ago. In sending you this second announcement I am only obeying your express orders; I do not suppose it likely that you should feel inclined to leave town just now.'

'The very thing I am inclined to do,' laughed Ulrica to herself with reviving courage. That first communication which Mr. Bolt spoke of had reached her only to be tossed aside in the hurry of more pressing matters, but this second reminder could not have come more entirely in the nick of time. At least it gave a distinct and immediate shape to that wish to get out of London which had come upon her with the suddenness and intensity of a craze. Of course, that was the very thing; the 'marsh' with its fresh, salt air was the very place to give her back her strength and to blow the vapours of London from her brain.

'To-morrow—I shall be there to-morrow,' she said to herself as she laid her head on the pillow that night.

Just about the same time Mr. Rockingham, in his club, was also repeating to himself that same word—'to-morrow.'

And this was the third 'to-morrow' on which he had resolved to put his fate to the touch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

'IT IS WELL TO BE OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.'

'TO-MORROW!' The word was still in Mr. Rockingham's mind when he awoke in the morning, and not until he had rubbed the sleep out of his eyes did he realise that the to-morrow had become a to-day.

This time, surely, his opportunity could not possibly escape him. He dressed and breakfasted leisurely, secure in the conviction that he had an appointment with Ulrica. But, strange to say, neither the toilet nor the breakfast was a success. His studs had a curious knack this morning of slipping from between his fingers just as he thought he had got them fixed, and the coffee was strangely tasteless. Surely it could not be that he was—*agitated*?

All night long he had seen her in his dreams as he had seen her yesterday in the midst of the rabble—how beautiful she had looked, like a tigress at bay.

'This is childish!' said Mr. Rockingham suddenly, aloud, with a stamp of his foot. 'Of course she is beautiful, *tant mieux*; but supposing her hair were carrotty and her eyes green, I should be going to Park Lane just the same, of course.'

He gazed reflectively into the depths of his coffee-cup. Mr. Rockingham was not quite satisfied with himself to-day. He was almost a little puzzled. He could not remember ever having felt exactly like this before, not even on that summer's day long ago when Charlotte had met him, blushing, among the flowers in his father's garden. Of course he was marrying Ulrica for her money alone; to admit anything else would have been too glaringly inconsistent with all his principles.

The puzzled look was still on his face when, a little before twelve, he sallied forth.

Having purchased a carnation, which at least outshone its wasted brother of yesterday, he strolled down St. James's

Street, critically eyeing the vacant hansoms, and did not raise his stick until he caught sight of a specimen which suited him in every point, dark green cloth, India-rubber cased wheels, all the newest improvements of the day—in one word, the vehicle for the occasion.

It was just on the stroke of midday when he stepped out of this elegant conveyance and rang the bell at Countess Eldringen's door.

The first thing that gave him a shock was the row of open windows on the first floor. To be sure it was a magnificent day, but yet people do not generally do their ventilation on quite such a wholesale system. The next thing that sent a shiver down his back was the look of the hall when the door was opened. The floor was bare of rugs, and in one corner there lay a perfect mound of brown Holland wrappers, while footmen in shirt-sleeves and housemaids in aprons that evidently meant business were moving backwards and forwards across the scene. Through the door of the adjoining dining-room, that dining-room in which he had enjoyed so many exquisite meals, Mr. Rockingham caught sight of nothing but muffled furniture and bagged candelabra.

'The Countess is at home, I believe?' he asked, bringing back his eyes to the face of the man who had opened the door, in whom he was astonished to recognise the august butler Brownley himself, and whom he was still more astonished to see in a linen jacket. He asked his question assertively, as though he were challenging Brownley to deny the Countess's presence.

'Her ladyship is gone, sir. Her ladyship left town this morning.'

Mr. Rockingham shifted his exquisitely rolled-up umbrella from his left hand to his right and back again, and fixed Brownley with a glance as stern as though he suspected him of complicity in a practical joke.

'The Countess *must* be at home; I have an appointment with her.'

'She's gone, sir,' said Brownley again, with that sort of deadly cheerfulness which kills hope more effectually than the most gloomily emphasised assertions.

'Quite gone?' asked Mr. Rockingham, surprised into a temporary touch of imbecility.

'Quite gone, sir. We're covering up the furniture, and I follow to Morton by the night train. If you have any message you wish to entrust—' and at this moment Brownley, catching sight of an awkwardly carried ladder that had barely shaved a hall mirror, darted off to admonish the culprit and protect the threatened object. When he returned to the open doorway Mr. Rockingham was still standing on the step, pulling perplexedly at his moustache and staring at the knob of his umbrella. Brownley cleared his throat and gazed at the visitor with a sort of 'pray-don't-let-me-hurry-you-but-there-is-no-denying-that-my-time-is-precious' look about him. Mr. Rockingham felt it, and, after having asked a few more questions, withdrew in deep meditation. It must have been some unexpected call, of course; nothing but that could explain her forgetfulness concerning his announced visit. No doubt there would be a perfectly satisfactory explanation ready, but the mischief was that he could not wait till the satisfactory explanation came to him. He would have to leave England on the next day but one, and between this and that he must absolutely speak to her—the deduction was as easy as a sum in simple addition.

Mr. Rockingham returned to his lodgings, looked up a train, and put a few things into a bag, for the chances were that he would spend the night in the country.

The trains did not happen to suit very well, so that it was somewhere between seven and eight o'clock that evening when he found himself driving up the Morton avenue in the solitary station-fly which was always there patiently and punctually to meet the London train, and which, to its agreeable surprise, picked up a fare about once in three months.

It was to be hoped that they would have done dinner, was Mr. Rockingham's reflection as he gazed out through the windows of the fly at the monster boles of the beech trees, past which they were jingling at a monotonous jog-trot. To be ushered in between an *entrée* and a roast would scarcely be calculated to enhance the romance of

the situation. No, he would not allow his presence to be made known until the ladies had risen from the table. To be discovered as a surprise in the drawing-room would be very much more appropriate.

Having settled this point to his satisfaction, he gave himself up to a more critical contemplation of the Morton Park than he had ever yet indulged in. It would be pleasant to walk under these sweeping branches with Ulrica by his side, and he smiled out of the window at the beeches and the laurels with something of the patronising benevolence of the future proprietor.

Truly it was an enticing picture to dwell upon. Here, close at hand, every twig was still distinct, but over the distant depths of the glades the first faint veil of dusk was softly falling. It had been glaringly hot since morning. All day long the trees have stood in sullen immobility under the tyranny of the sun, wearing his hot golden chains in slavish silence, bowing their heads before his power in abject submission. But now a whisper rises up there among the crowns of the beeches, those green tongues are beginning to wag; the agitation creeps downwards, and in the next minute the bushes too are talking treason. Even the great bracken ferns and even the little grasses stir themselves with a shiver and then crouch down again fearfully, as though the bare idea of rebelling against their master set them all a-trembling.

‘Not at home.’

When for the fourth time within three days Mr. Rockingham found himself baffled by this simple formula, his supreme equanimity came nearer to forsaking him than it had ever yet done.

‘Look here, young man,’ he said firmly, ‘I have just come straight from London, and I *know* that the Countess is here. Probably she is at dinner, in which case be so good as to show me to the drawing-room.’

The somewhat youthful domestic quailed visibly under the eye fixed upon him, yet he made no movement towards ushering in the guest.

‘Her ladyship is not at dinner, sir; she dined early, and immediately after dinner the ladies went out in the victoria.’

'Went out in the victoria?' repeated Mr. Rockingham, as though he were striving to digest the fact. 'Do you know where to?'

'I don't, sir.'

'Well, show me into the drawing-room all the same,' said Mr. Rockingham, after a moment of stupefied reflection. 'The ladies will most likely not be out long. The Countess expects me,' he added, by way of encouragement to the evidently puzzled footman. Visitors at this hour were new in his experience.

In the drawing-room to which he was ushered the shutters were closed, and lamps were burning softly under rose-coloured shades. The newest evening papers lay all ready cut open on a basket-table close by a luxurious easy-chair. The scent of fresh-cut flowers pervaded the air. Mr. Rockingham threw himself into the easy-chair and took up one of the papers; then, after running his eye down a column, tossed it aside again and looked about him. There was no use in denying any longer that he was excited.

'Better take a look around,' he muttered, almost as though he were recalling himself to a duty; and abandoning the easy-chair, he went towards the folding-doors which stood open, and pushed aside the heavy curtains which masked the entrance to the suite of larger drawing-rooms, the so-called state rooms, which were seldom made use of. The one immediately beyond was the rococo room, all flowered brocade and china shepherdesses; then followed the 'red room,' where dead-gold moulding was relieved by ruby plush. 'Hm,' mused Mr. Rockingham, as he sauntered slowly onwards. 'Some of the pictures could bear being rehung, and I am not sure whether that ottoman wouldn't look better in a more prominent position.'

Save for the fading daylight which strained in through the lowered blinds, both these rooms were unlighted, but from between the portières of the doorway beyond a glimmer as of a candle-light pierced unexpectedly. Mr. Rockingham, with a movement of surprise, went forward to investigate. Was it possible that that puppy of a footman had misinformed him after all?

It was the 'Venetian room' into which he now stepped, the largest in the suite, and generally considered the most perfect of its kind—a dream of sea-green and crystal. Here, also, the blinds were down, but at the far end a couple of candles were burning, leaving two thirds of the apartment in a mysterious semi-gloom and sending the fantastic shadow of a big palm sprawling over half the ceiling. Seen by this light the 'Venetian room' might have been some dim sea-cave inhabited by—ah, there was the sea-nymph herself! And Mr. Rockingham made an expectant step forward as in the circle of candle-light over there a tall white figure rose from a low seat. Another step, and then a sudden halt of dismay—oh, horror, it was Charlotte!

Never in his life had Mr. Rockingham come so near to losing his head as in this moment. His first impulse was to turn and fly, and though he controlled himself sufficiently to remain standing on the spot he had reached, and even to incline himself before the lady on whom he had intruded, the one question with which his mind was frantically grappling was how to get out of the room in the quickest and least compromising way; for to make conversation to his old love while waiting to declare his devotion to the new one was a situation too unbearable to be contemplated for a moment, even by a diplomat.

The pause lasted no more than half a minute, and it was Charlotte who spoke first, in a tone of wondering delight.

'Bas—Mr. Rockingham, *you* here?' and she laid down the pile of old songs she had been listlessly turning over and advanced towards the intruder. 'They did not tell me—I did not know.'

Then, with a sharp ring of suspicion in her voice: 'What is it? What have you come for?'

'I came down here because I desire to speak to Countess Eldringen—on—on—urgent business,' said Mr. Rockingham bluntly. He had quickly decided in the interval that bluntness would be the kindest thing under the circumstances, as well as the most effectual. 'But I am told she has driven out. I presume, however, that as it is almost dark she will soon be back, and in the meantime—'

'She will not be back so very soon,' said Charlotte, almost

triumphantly. 'They have gone to Morton Bank to that "marsh" she is so mad about, to see the last gap closed up, or something. They will work on into the night, till the turn of the tide, whenever that is. I dined with them, but my courage failed me for the expedition; my cold is not right yet, you know, and the night air is so chilly.'

She kept talking on, eagerly yet vaguely, searching his face the while with her mistrustful eyes, her fingers playing nervously with the white lace of her dinner-dress.

'Morton Bank, did you say? Thanks,' said Mr. Rockingham, in sincere gratitude. 'I could not get the information I wanted from the footman. Many thanks,' and with another hasty bow, he turned and attempted to escape.

'What are you going to do?' Charlotte called after him, aghast.

'I am going to speak to the Countess at Morton Bank. I told you my business was urgent.'

He had been forced to face round to answer her; now he resumed his progress towards the door, and had all but reached it when his name rung out so suddenly and so sharply that he stood still once more, as though struck by a knife.

'Basil!'

It was scarcely a word, it was rather a wild, despairing cry, so heartrending in the sincerity of its pain that, egotist though he was, he felt his heart clutched by an irresistible pity.

'Basil, you are going there to ask her to be your wife?'

She had crossed the room to where he stood, stock-still, beside the door, a fold of the sea-green portière between his finger and thumb, as he was in the act of dividing it. With great, wistful eyes she looked up into his face, the muscles about her mouth working convulsively.

'Really, Lady Nevvill, I—'

'Oh, don't, don't! I am unhappy enough already. Don't call me by that hateful name. Call me as you used to call me, only for this once at least. Tell me the truth at last; don't play with me any more; you have been trampling on my heart all the summer. This urgent business you have with her, it is to ask her to marry you, is it not?'

No, don't tell me,' and she put her hands over her ears. 'I could not bear it. But you *do* want to marry her, do you not?'

The rambling harangue had given Mr. Rockingham time to rally his wits around him and form a plan of action.

'Well, look here, Charlotte,' he said, as she paused, boldly striking out on the new line on which he had decided, 'I have no wish at all to keep you in the dark with regard to my plans. Between such old friends,' and he smiled a not quite successful smile, 'there is no need for secrecy.'

He had quite dropped his company tone, and was speaking now with the ostentatious frankness of the man who is yearning to pour out his tale into a sympathetic ear. It was rather a desperate experiment, of course, which presented itself to his mind.

'I will be quite honest with you; I *do* intend to marry Countess Eldringen, if she will have me' (the last clause tacked on as an after-thought), 'and I *am* on my way to ask her this very question. My impending departure forces me to hurry the step in this apparently unseemly manner. Now, will you not wish your old playmate good luck?' and he held out his hand towards her.

Instead of taking it Charlotte sunk down on a seat and burst into a perfect hurricane of sobs.

'Oh, that day!' she moaned, through her tears. 'I saw it all on that day, I knew then it must come to this. The day you came to the Old Hall and she was there—oh, why did I ever let you see her! It is all my own doing—everything was so perfect before then; oh, I knew it, I knew it!'

Mr. Rockingham was very nearly at his wits' end; truly his sins had found him out. As he looked down at Charlotte's thin shoulders heaving with the passion of her tears, he could not but feel horribly guilty. The only thing he could think of as a means of easing his conscience was to let himself down on the seat beside her and attempt to draw down one of the hands which she had pressed over her eyes.

'Listen to me, Charlotte,' he said, in as soothing a voice as he could command. 'Let me explain matters a little—will you not listen, Charlotte—Chatty dear?' (How she

shivered and thrilled at the sound of the childish name!) 'I think I can make you understand if you will listen. We always used to understand each other so well in the old days. For a long time past I have had the intention of marrying again; my position demands it of me, imperiously demands, and my position demands, too, that the wife I choose should possess certain—ahem—qualifications, without which she would be more a hindrance than a help on my further career. The life which an ambassador's wife has to lead is a very fatiguing one, full of most exhausting social duties; it follows, therefore, that physical endurance—perfect health, in other words—is among the most important of the qualifications to which I have referred.'

While he was speaking her sobs had been growing less convulsive, and gradually she had abandoned her hand to his. Now she looked up suddenly, with a faint ray of hope in her eyes.

'I never thought of that! So that is why you—you changed your mind? For there was a time last year when you did think of—I mean when you wanted to revive old times; was there not, Basil?'

'Yes, Charlotte, there was a time when I entertained such a hope.'

'And my wretched health came in the way,—I think I am beginning to understand.'

Mr. Rockingham gently stroked the white hand he still held, and looked straight before him. There had been no point of interrogation in her voice, so that he was not obliged to answer; for which small mercy he felt sincerely thankful, for he never liked to tell lies except in the extremest emergencies.

'I knew you would understand,' he went on, in that same soothing tone, very much the same tone in which he had said to her very much the same things on a certain October evening about twenty years ago. 'Fate has been very unkind to you—to us, Charlotte; for the second time in our lives we are compelled by circumstances to give each other up,' he finished, bungling a little over the conclusion of the phrase. 'I can only repeat now what I said to you then, that as my first marriage was a marriage of *convenience*, so

also my second will have to be. Do you quite follow what I say?’

‘Yes, Basil, I think I see,’ she murmured tremulously. ‘It is as hard upon you as upon me, is it not? I know that you have never quite forgotten me,’ and she looked into his eyes with a tender question, in which there was nevertheless a touch of suspicion.

‘It is confoundedly hard upon us both,’ said Mr. Rockingham emphatically. It was the only convenient thing he could say at the moment. The moderation of her tone surprised him agreeably. She spoke in profound discouragement and sadness, but the hysterical excitement seemed quieted. And yet, despite his sense of relief, he felt aware that there was in her manner something which he did not understand.

‘There, that is my old sensible Chatty! Now, then, since we are agreed that I must marry, and since we are agreed that unhappily your health unfits you for the duties of an ambassador’s wife—’

She gave a sudden start and drew her hand out of his with a quick, nervous jerk.

‘Oh no, I did not mean that,’ she stammered, ‘I did not mean that you should marry me; was that what I said?’ and she looked about her with wondering, frightened eyes. ‘I quite understand the sort of wife you require to have, but only—’

‘But only what, Charlotte?’

‘Why need it just be *her*?’ she burst out, her excitement beginning once more to rise. ‘Why must it just be Ulrica Eldringen?’

‘What can possibly be your objection to Countess Eldringen?’

Charlotte looked down and began to tear holes in the lace of her dinner-dress.

‘She is so much too young for you, and then she really has very little education; I am sure she would always be doing the most ridiculous things. If only you would not be in such a hurry, I am sure I could think of some one who would suit you much better. There is Miss Frieze, for instance; she has two millions, at least—’

'And one shoulder higher than the other. No, thank you, Charlotte.'

'Or one of Lord Fuller's daughters; they are all very well off, and have been *so* well brought up.'

Mr. Rockingham knew Lord Fuller's daughters by sight, and his only reply was a slight shudder. It was most obliging of Charlotte to wish to choose a wife for him; still, he was a little at a loss how to account for her anxiety in the matter.

'No, no, Charlotte, you are mistaken,' he said hastily, in order to avert all further suggestions of this order. 'No choice could be more suitable than the one I have made. Countess Eldringen unites in her person all the qualifications I look for in a wife. Her social position is excellent, her health is of the most robust, she is wealthy.'

'And beautiful,' added Charlotte, narrowly watching his face.

'And beautiful,' repeated Mr. Rockingham, with studied carelessness. 'At any rate, she has the proper figure for an ambassador.'

'Has she, really?' said Charlotte, with a delicately venomous sneer. 'And has it never struck you that other people besides you may have found out all these wonderful qualities? How do you know that she has not made her choice, just as you have made yours?'

She asked it with a glance shot sideways, as keen and as intent as the one with which the bird of prey watches for its victim, and then she held her breath and waited for the result of her experiment. For it was nothing but that. Within her own mind she had no shadow of a doubt that her all-conquering hero had here conquered once again. It was a well-worn and time-honoured feminine *ruse* in which she had taken refuge, but it served its purpose none the less.

Mr. Rockingham turned a startled face towards his companion. There had seemed to lie such a curious significance in the tone that he actually paled a little under the sunburn of his skin.

'What do you mean? To what are you referring? Do you know anything?'

'I know all that I want to know,' cried Charlotte, with

a sudden burst of passion. 'I know that you have lied to me, I know that this marriage will not be a mere marriage of *convenience*—you love her, Basil, you love her!'

'Really, Charlotte—'

'You love her, you love her—deny it if you can!'

They were both standing by this time, for Charlotte had risen in her excitement, and Mr. Rockingham could do no less than follow her example.

'Deny it!' she almost shrieked, her hand on his arm, her eyes wildly searching his face.

'I have no wish to deny it,' said Mr. Rockingham coldly, and it was as he spoke that he for the first time admitted the truth to himself.

In one instant the whole man had undergone a change. He had frozen up suddenly. As long as she was tractable he had been willing to spare her; but since she was becoming inconvenient he would not waste more trouble over her. It was to restore her peace of mind that he had made the sacrifice of prevaricating a little in the conversation that was past; and it had really been a sacrifice, for this man was as straight as he was narrow—he would not make any further concession in the way of a direct lie.

For a few seconds after he had spoken, Charlotte remained staring at him blankly. Despite her vehement assertion, she did not seem quite to believe her ears.

'And you say this to *me*?' she asked, in a low, almost awe-struck tone.

'To any one who asks me.'

Then her passion broke bounds, but without tears this time, for the pitch of excitement at which tears are possible had already been passed.

'But to me, to *me*, Basil! Think a little what you are saying! Have you forgotten who I am? Have you forgotten that I am that same Charlotte who was your first, your only love—yes, your only love till now? No, no, I cannot believe it, you have not forgotten me quite, you do love still, not as I love you, of course, as I have loved you since I can remember—that is not to be expected; but I have been first in your heart till now, and I must remain first, Basil, I must! You only mean that you cannot marry me

because of my unhappy health; is not that what you mean?'

'I have told you my meaning plainly enough.'

'No, not plainly, not plainly enough yet; I do not seem able to understand. I can bear to give you up, I bore it once before, but I *must* remain first in your heart. Basil, I love you too well!'

'Aye, so well that you would wish to see me condemned to a loveless marriage for the second time in my life. Commend me to the love of woman!'

She looked at him aghast, with bloodless lips and haggard eyes. Had he become iron within the last two minutes? It was not two minutes yet since he had still yielded, or seemed to yield, to her touch.

'Do you mean that you doubt my love? Do you reproach me with the sacrifice I made, the sacrifice which you yourself demanded of me? Oh, I must say it at last, I have wanted to say it so often, so often—Basil, that sacrifice has been the mistake of my life. I was mad when I made it; I have never been happy for one moment since. I love riches, and I love position, but these twenty years have taught me that I do not love them so well as I love *you*; I hate poverty, and I hate pinching, but they are nothing to the wretchedness of living without *you*. If we were sitting now in the beech-grove at home as we sat then—O Basil, do you remember?—and if you spoke to me as you spoke then, do you imagine I would give you the same answer? Ha, ha! I have learnt my lesson since then. I should not listen to your arguments; I should cling to you in spite of everything, in spite of the whole world, in spite of yourself; I should close your mouth with my kisses, I should lay my arms about your neck and whisper into your ear that I would rather eat dry bread with you than feast with any other man, that I would go and beg with you to the ends of the earth rather than become another man's wife! That is what I should have said to you in the beech-grove that evening when we sat on the bank and the dead leaves were falling to our feet, and the rooks were cawing overhead, and we both felt so sad, oh, so wretched and so sad! Do you not remember, Basil?'

You must, you *must* remember?' and she clutched his arm and almost shook it, as though she would awaken his memory by force.

Mr. Rockingham stared in amazement. Could this be Charlotte? She was a weak creature, indeed, but her love was stronger than that of many strong women, and for one brief moment it had transformed her.

For the first time in his life he stood almost shamefacedly before her, answering not a word; there was no word that he could say. It was, indeed, terrible to be loved in this way.

With a dry, tearless sob, Charlotte stopped speaking.

The wall of silence by which she was met seemed to have convinced her more thoroughly than any arguments could have done. A new expression came into her face. Something of the same change which had come over him a short time ago seemed now to descend upon her. In the flash of a second she became very quiet, dangerously quiet, thought Mr. Rockingham, noting the gleam as of polished steel which dawned in her eyes. When she spoke this time, it was in a tone he had never heard her use—a dull, sullen voice, which somehow boded harm.

'And so you are determined to marry Countess Eldringen?'

'I am determined to try my luck.'

'And if I tell you that it lies in my power to prevent you doing so?'

'How so?' he frigidly inquired.

She seemed to be reflecting as to how to express her meaning.

'I possess some information,' she said at last, speaking with cautious slowness, 'which, should I choose to publish it, would undoubtedly prevent your marrying Ulrica Eldringen.'

'How did you come by this information?'

'That is my secret.'

'I don't believe there is any secret,' said Mr. Rockingham boldly, though a slight alarm rung in his tone; 'I defy you to produce any information which could stand in the way of my marriage.'

'Nevertheless, I have but to say four words in order to throw your carefully built project in a miserable heap on the ground.'

'I don't understand this; it must be some absurd idea. Charlotte, what do you mean?' In proportion as she was growing cooler, his excitement was rising. 'Charlotte, you must tell me what you mean.'

She looked at him doubtfully for a moment, as though wavering. Then she glanced about her with the same look of panic which he had noted once before on this evening. Finally she shook her head.

'No, I cannot tell you.'

'Is it anything to her discredit?'

'It is something that will make you think less well of her.'

'This is too much or too little, I must know more. What was that you hinted just now about an attachment? Is that what you mean? You have found out something about her former life?'

'I will not tell you.'

But the innate brutality of the man was now roused; she had tormented him, tantalised him, and she could hope for no mercy.

'I insist upon your telling me. This secret you speak of, does it concern her former life? Answer me, Charlotte!'

'O Basil!' she gasped, bending from him in alarm, for he had seized her by the wrist and held her in no gentle grasp. 'O Basil, have pity!'

His fingers only tightened a little.

'Charlotte, answer me.'

'No, no, it has nothing to do with her former life, nothing at all, I swear it!'

'That is well,' he said, releasing her. 'Whatever else there may be to hear I shall hear from her own lips, no doubt.'

Without giving Charlotte another glance he walked to the door and was gone.

She remained standing where he had left her for a full minute, mechanically rubbing her bruised wrist. She knew

that it was bruised, and yet she was not aware of any pain; it was not there that the cruelty had lain.

At last she knew for certain that she was nothing to him, and that that other woman was everything.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE LAST GAP.

UNTIL she heard the dull slam of the closing of the hall door, Charlotte stood where Mr. Rockingham had left her; then with a start she roused herself, and stopped rubbing her wrist. With long steps she began to pace up and down the length of the 'Venetian room,' sweeping her white skirts behind her. It was only now that she was beginning again to think consecutively.

She had followed Ulrica down from London, not with any distinct purpose in her mind, but merely because of an instinctive dread she felt of losing sight of her until Basil should have sailed from England. Of his first wife she had not felt the smallest jealousy; from the moment she had seen Lady Emmeline Rockingham's photograph she had been satisfied that there could be no question of rivalry between them, that she, and she alone, must still reign supreme in Basil's heart. But this that was now impending was something altogether different; she was to cease to exist for him; no, no, it could not, it could not be!

And yet was it not even now working towards its accomplishment? Was not Basil at this very moment on his way to the 'marsh'? Was not each turn by the wheels that were bearing him along the road diminishing the distance between him and Ulrica, even as it was increasing the distance between her old lover and her?

Where would he be by this time? Her walk grew more restless, her steps more hurried. He would have passed the gates, of course, he would have reached the road, it would not be very long before he got to the old inn they

called the 'Dead Sailor's Home.' Then a few minutes would take him to the 'marsh.' How would the meeting exactly take place? Ulrica would be watching the workmen, he might not be able to speak to her alone at once; but he was so clever, he would find an excuse for drawing her aside, the dusk would favour him, and then—and then—O God! under the starlight of the summer night he would give her the kiss of betrothal.

With a groan, Charlotte stood still, her hands hanging clenched by her sides, her eyes staring wildly about her. Whichever way she looked the same picture framed in crystal flowers met her eye: the tall, slight figure of a woman, white-robed, and but for the roving eyes, immovable. The room seemed full of the ghosts of herself, all crowding around her, all whispering to her. She gazed at them vacantly, scarcely distinctly realising that they were but her own reflection thrown back by the many mirrors which almost covered the walls of this room. Her thoughts were far away on the 'marsh,' and already her body was straining in the same direction. It was not possible to stay away. With her own eyes she must watch the course of events, with her own ears she must hear her doom sealed. Great God! even at this very moment it might be happening! And uttering a shrill exclamation, Charlotte almost rushed at the bell-rope.

The startled face of the footman who answered the summons surprised her in a vague and distant manner; she was not aware of how violently she had rung.

'I want a carriage immediately, my carriage, the brougham, the one I came over in, do you understand? Have the horses put to immediately.' She scarcely waited till he was gone, but followed almost on his heels to the hall, where she resumed her restless walk, peering every now and then through the window to see if the brougham was not in sight. 'Surely it would be better if I were dead,' she kept repeating to herself monotonously. 'Surely it would be better if I were dead. To the Old Hall, as fast as you can drive,' was the order she gave the coachman as she stepped in. Then she bade him wait, and at the end of five minutes came down again in a dark walking costume

for which she had exchanged her dinner-dress. Then the order was given for Morton Bank.

It was past eight by this time, but the summer night did not promise to be as still as the summer day had been. Those green, pointed tongues which had begun by talking treason in whispers were now proclaiming their doctrine aloud; open rebellion had broken out among the slaves of the sun. All along the road they were putting their heads together, and the groups of beeches and oaks which stood here and there in the fields seemed to be gesticulating wildly, nodding and beckoning and huddling together like a band of conspirators engaged in earnest discussion.

But the coachman had again received the order to drive fast, and in a comparatively short time Morton Bank was reached, and the line of the trees passed. Here the rising gale, unchecked by any obstacle, met Charlotte full in the teeth, as though determined to beat her back upon her steps. But she pressed onward undaunted. It was not yet quite dark, for the gale had brought no clouds with it. It promised to be but one of those brief summer storms which sometimes spring up after sunset and generally pass without rain. The fleecy atoms scudding over the sky were too slight and too rare even to veil the stars that were just beginning to twinkle out faintly. What between the starlight and the twilight, Charlotte could see her way plainly enough. She could even make out the group of moving figures that were swarming about one spot of the bank—men, horses, carts, all crossing and recrossing each other, all jostling against each other, all impregnated with the same intense sense of hurry. It was towards these that she directed her footsteps when she set out to cross the 'marsh,' and it was not until she had drawn much nearer that she became aware of a smaller group, consisting of three persons only, who were slowly moving along the top of the bank, battling with the wind and gradually drawing nearer to the spot at which the work was going on. Two ladies and a gentleman—Ulrica, Mrs. Byrd, and Mr. Rockingham.

Charlotte's steps slackened a little; she was more exhausted than she knew by her struggle with the gale. Now that she saw those three figures so close before her, she

began to tremble at the audacity of her own venture. What was it she had come for? What could she hope to do? What to prevent?

'Bless me, here's another visitor!' exclaimed Mrs. Byrd, whose quick eyes were the first to espy the approaching figure. 'Who can it be?'

They had come to a standstill now, and it was while Ulrica was examining the earthwork under their feet that Mrs. Byrd had made her discovery, for she was less interested in earthworks than in possible visitors. The spot they had reached had only been filled in yesterday, as the expanse of fresh earth, stretching to a width of about a hundred yards, and contrasting sharply with the turf of the old bank, distinctly proclaimed. Thirteen such brown patches, varying in width from fifty to a hundred and fifty yards, could have been counted along the entire length of the bank, for thirteen gaps had already been closed; it was with the fourteenth and last that they were busy over there.

'Why, it is Lady Nevill,' said Mr. Rockingham, in a tone of annoyed surprise.

'To be sure, it is Charlotte!' exclaimed Ulrica, no less surprised. 'What on earth can she have come for? She absolutely declined to drive out with us.'

'A telegram,' suggested Mrs. Byrd. 'Or else the house is on fire.'

'Oh no, the house is not on fire,' said Mr. Rockingham, somewhat bitterly. 'She has only changed her mind as usual, that is all.'

'A telegram or a fire?' called out Mrs. Byrd, as soon as Charlotte had got within speaking distance. 'Don't keep us on thorns, there's a dear!'

Charlotte did not appear to have heard; indeed, in such a hurry was the rising gale to carry away every spoken word that even near neighbours were forced to converse in something not much under a shout.

'Aren't you going to give her an arm up?' asked Mrs. Byrd of Mr. Rockingham, as Charlotte reached the foot of the bank and cast a doubtful glance upwards.

There was no escape for Mr. Rockingham; with no very good grace he went to her assistance, and the next

minute Lady Nevyll, leaning on his arm, emerged on to the top of the bank. At the same moment she started back nervously; she had not been prepared to find herself in such immediate proximity to the water, for not only was it fast getting on towards high-water, but the gale blowing straight from the northwest was forcing the tide up above normal height, so that at this moment the bank did not stand more than eight or ten feet above an expanse of white-crested and tumultuous waves.

‘Now, *do* tell us what has happened?’ asked Mrs. Byrd of Charlotte, who still clung to Mr. Rockingham’s arm, attempting in vain to steady herself on the three feet or so of level ground, and at the same time fighting with the wind for her hat.

‘Nothing,’ gasped Charlotte—‘nothing has happened. Only it was so t-t-tiresome alone, and I thought as the night was so fi-fine I would come a-af-after all.’ Her voice was no match for the wind.

‘Fine, indeed!’ shouted back Mrs. Byrd. ‘It’s nothing but a special dispensation of Providence that we’ve not all been blown to tatters long ago. It’s the funniest arrangement I’ve ever heard of. Are there any more detachments of spectators coming out, I wonder? or are you positively the last?’

‘I don’t know, I had to come,’ said Charlotte vaguely.

‘But in this wind and with your cold!’

‘I had to come,’ she repeated. She was looking anxiously at Ulrica; no, nothing had happened yet, so much was certain; Mrs. Byrd’s presence must have been an obstacle. Then she gazed sideways at Basil’s face, and instinctively shrunk back. He had not spoken, but the frown of anger on his face told her enough.

‘Oh, you had to come, had you?’ chattered on Mrs. Byrd, in happy unconsciousness of the strain in the situation. ‘All I can say is that if this wind is going to rise much more I shall have to go. My dear girl, let’s get into the shelter of the bank, I entreat you.’

‘Not yet!’ cried Ulrica eagerly. ‘I love this wind, it’s the very thing I have come for!’

Ulrica stood with her face towards the sea; her cheek

was wet with spray, one lock of dark hair was blown right across her forehead; in her belt she had stuck a bunch of late sea-pinks, the last of the sea-pinks that would bloom on the 'marsh,' for in a few months the plough would have passed over that green surface, and the wild stripling have bowed its neck to the iron yoke of utility.

'Might I implore you not to stand quite so near the edge?' remarked Mr. Rockingham, with an anxiety which to Charlotte was only a fresh stab.

'It does look nervous work, does it not?' said Mrs. Byrd, 'though I suppose that if we *did* slip in we should have nothing more tragical to encounter than a cold foot-bath.'

'Rather more than that,' observed Ulrica, stepping back. 'The foot-bath would be over there where that boat is lying; but you forget that we are standing on what was yesterday still a gap, and here, straight in front of us, the sand is dug out to a depth of ten or twelve feet at least.'

'Do you mean that it would be possible to drown one's self in one of these holes?' asked Charlotte, suddenly letting go her hold on Mr. Rockingham's arm, and advancing even more perilously near to the edge than Ulrica had done.

'Most uncomfortably possible, I should say,' remarked Mrs. Byrd, with a shrug of her shoulders. 'Let's go and see how they are getting on with the bank over there. If the worst comes to the worst, and the gale turns to a hurricane, I intend to sit down under a cart.' And with this conclusion she ran nimbly down the side of the bank.

Ulrica followed more slowly. She was puzzled over Charlotte's manner. That last remark had been spoken in so strange a tone, and under such evident excitement, that it awoke in her mind some vague misgiving. She had never before seen Lady Nevyll so unstrung, so obviously drifting about between changing impulses, her helplessness so aggravated, her indecision so palpable—in one word so completely a caricature of herself.

As they neared the scene of action it became evident that the critical moment was approaching.

The last half-hour before the turn of the tide was one which lived in the memory of those present as the most

entirely breathless half-hour of their lives; scarcely less breathless to the spectators than to the workers themselves, for although several hundred men were assembled on the spot—navvies who had knocked off work at other gaps—there was not room for more than eighty or ninety to be simultaneously employed. The others stood by, their hands in their pockets, their pipes in their mouths, the shrewd interest with which they were following the work distinctly piercing through the stolidity of their countenances. Many of the pipes had gone out without the smokers becoming aware of it. They knew well enough that there was absolutely nothing to do but to stand by idle; that to rush to the assistance of those eighty or ninety companions would only increase the confusion and retard instead of hastening the advance of the bank.

Breathless though the work was, it was almost silent. No one had any power of lungs to waste on shouts or words of command, even if every one had not instinctively felt that the gale would have swallowed them up unheard.

No need, either, for commands; no need for encouragement, no need for cheering on; the blood of even the most stolid was up. They were racing with the tide, and they knew it, and each man felt that to be beaten by the sea must to an Englishman be an indelible disgrace. How could they ever again sing 'Rule Britannia' if they allowed those miserable twelve feet of water to get the better of them and of their bank?

Even Mr. Bolt, soul and spirit though he was of the whole, scarcely opened his lips during that long half-hour. With his white head bare in the wind—for his hat had long since been carried away—his clothes drenched with the salt spray, he stood upright on the rising bank, in himself a mute appeal to the workers. What could he have said? Was not every muscle strained to the utmost already, every wheel turning as fast as a wheel can be made to turn, every lash laid on at its sharpest, every bit of harness straining and creaking to the very verge of collapse? No rest for a moment—up the bank, down the bank; up with the full cart, down with the empty one; a fresh load of earth tilted out of the light box-cart at the top, then a clatter and

a scramble down; one man at the jaded horse's head, another hanging on to the back of the cart in guise of a living drag. Every wheelbarrow and every spade that could be begged, borrowed, or stolen for miles around seems to be collected about the spot; they are being stumbled over, kicked aside, and anathematised quite as much as they are being used, for, as in the case of the men, so also does the filling up of this last gap of all suffer from an oversupply of instruments and an undersupply of space.

Up the bank, down the bank, and all the time to be battling with the wind for one's every breath, and all the time to know that to relax the utmost effort for one minute is to let the sea top the bank. As it was, the new earthwork could not by any effort be kept more than a couple of inches above the heaving surface of the water. From time to time Mr. Bolt drew out his watch to see how many minutes remained before the tide must turn and the battle be won. Ten minutes more, five minutes more. Was it possible that, after all, they were going to beat that old fiend, the ocean, whose greedy claws had seemed already to be fixed into that precious bit of earth?

'If only one could help!' said Ulrica, for the fiftieth time already. 'I am sure I could wheel a barrow.'

Four minutes more, three minutes more, and then, though nothing in the situation seemed changed to the eye, Mr. Bolt knew that the worst of the danger was past. A few more cartfuls of earth, a few more torturing minutes of suspense, and it became evident that the tide was in retreat. Half an inch, an inch, two inches it fell, and hurrah! the precious bit of bank still stood firm. Mr. Bolt pocketed his watch and came off the bank. It was the signal for a general breath to be drawn all round, and for at least half the spades to be thrown aside. The other half worked on, though no longer at the same mad pace; there would be plenty of time before the return of high water to get the earthwork up out of all danger. One or two of the men flung themselves down full length on the turf, panting and drenched with sweat and spray. Mr. Bolt walked straight up to Ulrica, and having briefly announced, 'We've done it,' went and sat down on an over-

turned wheelbarrow, probably in order to conceal the fact that his old legs were too unsteady with excitement to support him any longer.

It had now got on to well past nine o'clock. Twilight was fading into the transparent darkness of the summer night. The navvies began to move slowly off in larger or smaller groups, leading the tired horses with them. The last of the workers threw aside their spades, and began to draw on their boots. True, the waves were still dashing against the bank and the spray was hissing in the air, but all that noisy demonstration had now become ridiculous. After their boots were drawn on, the last of the workmen still lingered around the spot, laconically exchanging their impressions and watching the retreat of the tide with grim satisfaction. It was as though they were gloating over their vanquished enemy.

Even Ulrica seemed to share something of this sentiment, for instead of making any movement towards leaving the spot, she followed Mr. Bolt's example by sitting down on one of the overturned wheelbarrows which were lying about in every direction.

Mrs. Byrd, having announced her intention of congratulating the engineer upon his success, walked over to where the old man was still struggling to recover his composure.

Mr. Rockingham drew a breath of relief. His nerves were excellently trained, but during the whole of this evening they had been subjected to an undue strain. If he could not create the opportunity he required this very evening, he must either leave England with his fate undecided, or telegraph for extension of leave at break of day to-morrow. All evening long he had been waiting to pounce on such a chance as Mrs. Byrd's withdrawal from the scene afforded him. To be sure, Charlotte was still there, standing a pace or two from the wheelbarrow on which Ulrica sat, and obviously undecided as to whether she should take place beside her or not. But Mr. Rockingham knew that his power over this woman was complete, that, whatever torture she might be suffering, she would never dare to act against his will, once distinctly expressed.

It required very little diplomacy to effect his purpose.

Lady Nevyl's shawl was forever escaping her hold in the wind and fluttering half out of her grasp. Nothing could be easier than for Mr. Rockingham to say, 'Allow me,' and to walk over to her side. Under cover of the fastening of the shawl all he had to say were the five words, pronounced in a low, distinct whisper, 'Leave me alone with her.'

'Where am I to go?' whispered back Charlotte, with trembling lips.

Mr. Rockingham very nearly said, 'To the devil, if you like,' but controlled himself sufficiently to substitute, 'Anywhere out of the way; go over to Mrs. Byrd. I must be left alone with her. Do you understand?'

She gazed up into his face with desperate, imploring eyes. There was neither pity nor relenting there, not the shadow of a hope. He did not even meet her gaze. Without another word, poor, helpless, forlorn Charlotte turned and slunk away, feeling as though the green surface of the 'marsh' were swaying beneath her feet, understanding exactly what it was that was going to happen, and understanding too that she herself was *helping* it to happen, yet feeling too numb even to raise a finger, could she by doing so have retarded the course of events.

She did not join Mrs. Byrd; it was in the opposite direction that she moved away. Mr. Rockingham, satisfied that she was gone, never thought of observing which way she went. It was now dark enough to favour the movements of any one who wished to remain unnoticed.

'Why, what have you done with Lady Nevyl?' asked Ulrica, somewhat startled to see him returning towards her alone. She also, like Charlotte, understood what was coming, and foresaw that the crisis which she had managed to avert at the ice-ball had once again become imminent. As she asked the question she looked past Mr. Rockingham, searching the gloom behind for some much desired 'third person' whose presence would make all personal topics impossible. There was no third person forthcoming, but just as she looked a figure was seen to emerge against the sky at a little distance off. It began to move slowly along the top of the bank, growing more and more indistinct in the gloom. There was the fluttering end of a

shawl—could it be Charlotte? And what could Charlotte be doing over there all alone?

But before Ulrica had gone further in her reflections, and before Mr. Rockingham had had time to utter a word, something quite unexpected occurred, for all at once Mr. Bolt sprung to his feet, overturning the wheelbarrow on which he had been sitting.

‘The bank!’ he shouted, in a tone of sudden terror.

Ulrica looked—every one looked—and there, sure enough, at about four feet from the top of the unfinished earthwork a jet of water of the thickness of a man’s wrist was spouting out, clear and vigorous.

There was a shout all round, and the dozen or so workmen who by good luck had not yet turned homewards, rushed at the spot and set about trampling the bank with all their strength, pounding sod after sod into the breach with their heavy hob-nailed boots. The fiend was, after all, more wily than they had given him credit for. A few more minutes of this sort of thing and every bit of the new earthwork would be doomed.

At the moment of the alarm Ulrica had risen; she was still breathlessly watching the swarm of men about the threatened spot, when all at once she raised her head sharply. Had that been a cry? She paused to listen, not certain whether she had heard aright; there were so many sounds all round, the wind, the water, the shouts of these trampling men, that it might well be; no, there it came again, unmistakable this time, borne to her very ear by a breath of the gale. A cry, a cry for help, a woman’s cry. What was this wild idea that shot through her mind? Why did she scan the sky-line of the bank with this sudden feeling of panic upon her? The figure that had been visible there a few minutes ago was gone, and the spot where she had seen it last would correspond as nearly as she could guess to that same spot on which the party had been standing a little earlier in the evening. Charlotte’s face, with the strange look it had then worn, returned to her memory; Charlotte’s words rang in her ears: ‘Do you mean that it would be possible to drown one’s self in one of these holes?’

In one instant it had all passed through her mind; in the next, already, light as a deer, she had bounded up the bank, and was running at the top of her speed towards the spot from whence the cries were ringing fainter and ever fainter.

CHAPTER XL.

CHARLOTTE CHANGES HER MIND.

BEFORE Ulrica reached the spot the cries had almost ceased. She was even not quite certain whether they had guided her aright. As she stood for one terrible moment on the freshly stamped earth of yesterday's gap, her breast heaving tumultuously with the speed at which she had run, the pulses beating in her ears and in her throat, there seemed to be no sign of life anywhere. In the sheet of water before her, strain her eyes as she would, she could see no movement but the heave and the break, the break and the heave, of those unquiet, foam-crested waves. Almost was she on the point of starting off once more to hurry further along the bank when there was an audible flap in the water, and there, not six paces from the shore, at her very feet, it seemed, something dark bulged from between two waves. There was no cry this time, nothing but a long-drawn moan.

Immediately all Ulrica's presence of mind returned to her. In face of the urgent necessity her thoughts ranged themselves with precision. She was standing on what had till the day before been a gap in the bank, consequently here, straight in front of her, there lay what they technically termed the 'gutter'—in other words, a pool of about a hundred yards in width, and in which at this moment the water could scarcely be less than eight feet in depth. There was no possibility of reaching that dark floating object from the bank, and to plunge in, since she could not swim, would simply mean the loss of two lives

instead of one. The boats—her eye had fallen upon them already—the boats were the only chance, but these too were out of reach of the bank.

‘But I can get to them through the shallow water,’ she said to herself, not merely in her thoughts, but actually pronouncing the words with her lips, as people sometimes do in moments of intense excitement, as though the sound of the words helped to give one a firmer hold upon the idea.

‘Let me see, let me try and remember,’ she argued out the point of herself; ‘at the foot of the old bank there, where the boats are lying, the water can only be between fifteen and twenty inches deep. If only I can get one loose. There will be chains, I suppose, or cord.’

Even as she thought it she had started off running again, but this time it was not far, only to where the abrupt change from brown earth to green turf marked the spot where the new bank merged into the old.

‘I am coming, I am coming!’ she called out as she ran, under the indistinct impression that the hope of immediate succour would keep up the struggling woman’s courage and with it her strength.

The instant her foot touched the turf she checked herself and slid down the side of the bank.

Yes, she had calculated rightly, the water did not even reach to her knees, though, owing to the constant roll, it was difficult to keep her footing even in this depth. It seemed to her an age before she had reached the boats; in reality not more than two minutes had elapsed between the time that she had first stood still on the bank and the moment that she put her hand on the side of the nearest boat. As she did so it became frightfully clear to her that by no effort of strength would she ever be able to move this huge lumbering monster by an inch. Though there was still water enough to send it rolling lazily from side to side, its keel lay more than half buried in the sand below. It was all up, then—no, there was something better still—one of the small feather-light skiffs which the fishermen used in fine weather, trailing by a rope to the bow of the big boat.

She was in it in a moment.

Would the knot ever be loosened? She tore off her gloves and tried again. Oh, how at that moment she blessed the habit of manual work, which had made her fingers so strong and so agile. Already the skiff was floating free, when she caught sight of a pair of sculls lying on the floor of the larger boat, and it occurred to her that she had no oars. With a desperate lunge over the side, which shipped a fair caskful of water, she succeeded in grasping the nearest of the sculls, and already was being drawn outward by the receding tide. She had no more notion of rowing than she had of swimming, but by leaning over the side of the skiff and plunging the oar downward to its entire length she was able to touch the bottom of the flood hollow, and thus, by a series of digs and pushes, to guide herself towards the spot where that dark object was still feebly beating its arms on the surface of the water. It did not require many digs or pushes either, for here also the retreating tide was doing its work, and within the last few seconds had sucked its victim as many more feet away from the bank.

‘I am coming! I am coming!’ Ulrica kept on calling even after she was already come, even after she had reached the struggling figure, and, letting the oar drop into the water, had seized her by the arms and was attempting to drag her into the boat. A mere waste of strength—she felt that immediately—and which must unavoidably result in the capsizing of the boat. Poor Charlotte in herself was no great weight, but her wet clothes clung about her like lead. ‘Better keep my breath for shouting,’ was Ulrica’s instinctive reflection, as, kneeling in the skiff, she held on like grim death to her prize, shouting for help the while with all the power of her strong young lungs.

‘Immediately, they will be here immediately, don’t be frightened, don’t let go,’ she said between whiles over the edge of the boat, though it was not clear to her whether Charlotte heard her or not. Her eyes, indeed, were open, but the convulsive clutch of her cold fingers upon Ulrica’s sleeve was growing feebler instant by instant.

‘They will be here immediately!’ It seemed to Ulrica

that she had repeated the mechanical phrase hundreds and hundreds of times, when, just as her strength was beginning to fail, there appeared running figures on the bank.

What next happened remained ever after strangely jumbled in her memory, for, from the moment that the necessity for clear thought ceased, her brain began to swim under pressure of the excitement. She never knew whether it was Mr. Rockingham, or Mr. Bolt, or one of the workmen who plunged off the bank and with half a dozen vigorous strokes had reached the skiff; she never knew who it was who relieved her stiffening arms of the weight that was beginning to grow intolerable, nor could she afterwards remember how she herself had got back to dry ground.

The next moment that was clear to her was the one when she was sitting on a heap of turf, shivering in her wet clothes, and listening with strained attention to Mr. Bolt's brief words of command:

'Higgins, the brandy bottle—quick I say! You, Jo, keep rubbing her hands; don't stop for a minute, man! Up with her head, a bit more yet!'

Then came a pause, and then at last came the words which Ulrica was waiting to hear:

'She is alive.'

And the next thing after that again, the next distinct picture which Ulrica bore away of the terrors of that night, was the vision of Charlotte lying, white and feeble, in the small rude bed at the 'Dead Sailor's Home,' whither she had been carried still in a half-conscious state.

Most sorely surprised was Mrs. Spicer, the respectable dame who kept the drearily named little inn, when the navies stopped with their strange burden at her door and she was called upon to make room for her ladyship 'as has got drooned in the gooter;' and with the most respectful alacrity did she place the narrow strip of a bedroom in which she had been about to lay her own ancient limbs to rest at her 'drooned' ladyship's disposal. Everything in the shape of a hot bottle or a warmed sheet that the house could produce was speedily forthcoming, and soon the ghastly pale woman in the bed began to show signs of revival.

The doctor, who appeared about an hour after they had

reached the inn, was averse to a move being made before morning; and so, until daylight came, Ulrica sat on a wooden chair watching Charlotte as she slumbered fitfully in Mrs. Spicer's bed, and listening to the gale which still swept in from the sea, making the little diamond-paned windows rattle in their somewhat decrepit sockets. Something in this way the wind must have whistled round the corners of the house on the night of that legendary wreck which they still spoke of on this coast. Neither was it the wind alone which helped to conjure up the vision of that disastrous night of fifty years ago, for, perhaps in order to live up to the requirements of the title, the landlady of the 'Dead Sailor' had adorned every mantelpiece in her house with various bits of rotten wood and rusty iron, which took precedence even of the unavoidable fan-shells and sea-urchins never wanting in a certain class of house at a certain distance from the sea, and which she confidently affirmed to be relics of the wreck.

Ulrica reflected a good deal during that long vigil, while Mrs. Byrd slept soundly on a mattress spread on the floor, and Mr. Rockingham slumbered—not quite so soundly—in an armchair in the parlour. She thought she understood what had happened. Indeed, it was not hard to understand, poor Charlotte's secret was so pitifully open. A great many things became clear to her as hour followed upon hour, and she looked back upon past events with eyes which, now that the passionate bitterness in her heart was fading away (how was it that since her visit to No. 8 in Cheesley Villas that bitterness had begun to fade so rapidly?), were able to estimate both events and things at their true value. She vowed to herself to make up for her past want of generosity by nursing Charlotte assiduously till she was well, and—when she was well—by forgiving her (perhaps if she tried very hard she might succeed in this)—by forgiving her for having been loved by Gilbert. And that point having once been reached, all the rest was simple enough. Mr. Rockingham was a man of sense, and, being convinced of the hopelessness of his present suit, there was no reason why Charlotte might not yet be happy forever after with her Basil, about whom she seemed infatuated even to the point

of suicide. As Ulrica sat and listened to the various voices which the gale was assuming in turn, and wondered vaguely whether the windows would be forced in or not, she could distinctly see herself laying Charlotte's hand within Basil's upon some future day, and, having started them on their honeymoon, turning her steps and her attention towards Dark Street, to the improvement of which she intended to devote the rest of her life.

There is nothing which is so soothing as to have come to a virtuous resolution; and so much cheered did Ulrica feel by the programme she had sketched out for the future, that she never noticed the grave expression on Dr. Smithson's face when he next returned to note the progress of the patient.

'We can move her now, can we not?' asked Ulrica eagerly. 'She would be so much more comfortable at home.'

'We *must* move her,' said the doctor. He had just been going through various manipulations which Ulrica knew to have been an examination of Lady Nevyl's lungs.

'We must move her immediately,' he said, stepping up to Ulrica in the window. 'Once the fever has come on, the risk would be too great.'

'The fever? Must a fever come on? What is it going to be?'

'It may be nothing, possibly; for most people it would simply be a bad cold, at the worst a stiff round of rheumatism; but I have known her ladyship's constitution for fifteen years, and I own I shall be surprised if, after such a wetting as this, she gets off with anything less than an attack of inflammation of the lungs.'

'Will it be a long illness?' asked Ulrica, somewhat sobered.

Dr. Smithson looked at her with a little hesitation expressed on his face.

'No,' he said at last, with the same hesitation in his voice. 'I don't think it will be a long illness—in either case.'

On that same day Charlotte was moved to the Old Hall.

Her sick-bed was not the first bedside which Ulrica had watched, neither was this the first case of inflammation of

the lungs with which she had had to do, for during her life at Glockenau she had gathered much sick-room experience; and yet for two whole days she did not guess what was coming. She *wanted* Charlotte to recover, if only in order that that hastily sketched-out programme should become a reality, and, being sanguine by nature, she therefore believed that what she wanted was going to happen.

Even when hot fit succeeded cold fit, and the hectic red burnt on Charlotte's cheek and the hollow cough racked her poor tortured chest, it only caused her to redouble the remorseful solicitude with which she was devoting herself to the woman whom she had once regarded as her rival; but it never caused her to despair.

The truth, when it came upon her, came with the stunning force of a blow.

It was on the morning of the third day that it came about—very early in the morning or very late in the night, as one might choose to take it. Ulrica, worn out with long watches, had fallen fast asleep on a sofa, so fast asleep that when roused by the short hacking cough she was beginning to know so well, she could not immediately be sure where she was, nor whether it was night or morning. She was by Charlotte's side already, holding the soothing drink to her lips, before she had succeeded in quite collecting her senses.

Charlotte pushed the glass aside, shaking her head. As she took her handkerchief from her lips Ulrica saw that it was stained with blood.

Without a word she sprang at the bell. 'Send for Dr. Smithson immediately,' she said, not turning her head as she heard the door opening. To her astonishment it was Dr. Smithson who advanced to the bed. He had paid his last visit late last night and had retired without making any special comment.

'I thought it more advisable to sleep in the house,' was the reply he gave to Ulrica's questioning glance.

Five breathless minutes passed, minutes that were heavy with questions of life and death, and now Charlotte lay once more still among her cushions, a little whiter, a shade more ghastly than she had been an hour ago. Ulrica, casting one more glance backwards as she followed the

doctor out of the room, saw that the eyelids were closed, the breast slowly laboring, the hands lying passive on the coverlet. Most likely she would remain in this state of semi-consciousness for hours.

Close outside the door, keeping her fingers upon the handle which she had not even turned, so impossible did it seem that that inert figure in the bed could be capable of anything so active as *listening*, Ulrica stood still and looked into the doctor's face. He was waiting for her in the passage.

'That was blood,' she said in a steady whisper; 'did you see?'

'Do you think that her ladyship would wish any of her relations to be telegraphed for?' was Dr. Smithson's reply.

Ulrica grasped the door-handle a little tighter.

'Do you mean that there is no hope?'

'I mean that until now it has, in my opinion, been a question of days, and that now it has become a question of hours—that is what I mean. I have watched her ladyship for some time past; these two winters, which, contrary to my advice, she insisted on passing in England, have been her undoing. But for this last unfortunate accident she might, by confining herself exclusively to a warm climate, have kept herself alive for some years; but it would scarcely have been living, simply a "keeping alive." As matters now stand I cannot even answer for the next twenty-four hours. Most likely the next twelve will see the end.'

Ulrica leant against the door-post, too much staggered to speak immediately.

'I suppose you would not object to a consultation?' she asked at last.

Dr. Smithson bowed politely.

'Quite the contrary. In fact, if you had not made the suggestion I should have insisted on a consultation, or perhaps I should rather say a ratification of my verdict, for unfortunately the case is so terribly simple that it is almost an insult to Sir William Parner to be telegraphed for.'

'Telegraph for him all the same,' said Ulrica, and as Dr. Smithson moved away to execute her wish, she gathered together all her strength, and re-entered that sick-room,

which, as she now knew, was so soon to be a chamber of death. She came in softly, holding her breath; careful not to push against the tall Japanese screen that had been placed there as a guard against possible draughts. Softly she skirted its lacquered edge, and then stopped short with a start of terror. There, close to the thin paper wall, her hands clutching the back of a chair, her bare feet sinking into the soft carpet, the flicker of a night-light playing over her white night-dress, stood Charlotte.

'Are you mad?' screamed Ulrica, starting forward after that first moment of stupefaction.

Charlotte turned her white, frightened face upon her. There was something of the look of the criminal on it before whose eyes the judge has just donned his black cap. But, scared though she was, there was an incongruous and quite inexplicable eagerness piercing through the look of pure fright.

'I heard everything,' she said, in a faint, husky voice. 'I heard Dr. Smithson say that I am going to die—to-day, perhaps. Oh, you thought I was asleep, did you?' and a gleam of cunning came into the unnaturally bright blue eyes.

'Go back to bed,' said Ulrica peremptorily.

'Yes, yes, I am going back. I know all that I want to know; I am going to die; and you would have let me die without my knowing how near it was. That would have been terrible!'

'You are talking nonsense!' said Ulrica, trying to speak angrily. 'You could not have heard—'

'Could I not? I can repeat every word. If it had not been for this accident I might have been "kept alive" for years. Have I got that right? Tell me, do you believe that it was an accident?'

'I don't know what to believe,' said Ulrica, in sore distress. 'Oh, do lie still, I implore of you; don't speak, don't say another word. It is the only chance—'

'That is not true—there is no more chance—you forget that I heard everything. I am glad I cheated you; I am glad I listened; I felt I was going to die, but I wanted to know for certain, quite for certain.'

‘But I don’t want you to die,’ said Ulrica fiercely. ‘I want you to live. Dr. Smithson may be mistaken, doctors often are. I have telegraphed for Sir William Parner—he may give us hope. Don’t lose courage; please, please don’t lose courage.’

‘Sir William Parner—yes, I heard that too. Do you think I am a fool, Ulrica? Do you think I am frightened of dying? I am not frightened—at least I don’t think I am. When I stood on the bank and saw the water so close before me I was not frightened either; but when I felt the cold, cold water rising and getting into my ears and into my throat, I—’ she shuddered convulsively.

‘You changed your mind,’ said Ulrica, with a grimly humorous recollection of some remark which Mr. Rockingham had made that last evening on the ‘marsh.’

‘Yes, I changed my mind. Why don’t you laugh? I think it is rather funny. I have been changing my mind all my life, and generally it was too late.’

‘Charlotte, Charlotte!’ sobbed Ulrica, kneeling beside the bed. ‘It must not be too late now, I will not let it be too late. I am going to nurse you, oh, so carefully; you cannot think what care I shall take of you. I have been unkind to you, I know, cruelly unkind; but when you are well again you will forgive me, and you will never, never have a better friend than I shall be to you—I swear it, Charlotte—never!’

She was attempting to caress Charlotte’s fever-hot fingers as she spoke, but they were impatiently withdrawn. The wide blue eyes remained indeed fixed on her face, but there was nothing like response in their over-brilliant light.

‘You needn’t give yourself all that trouble. I don’t want your friendship. You are my enemy and I am yours. Don’t you know that I hate you? That I can’t help hating you? There is only one other person that I ever hated like you. Why, I hate you so much that I am even almost glad that I am dying, because, you see, now I can speak. It has nearly killed me not to speak before, and yet I could not until I knew for certain, *quite* for certain that I should not recover. Did you actually think,’ and she turned her

head sharply on the pillow, 'that I was going to die without my revenge?' The husky voice merged into husky laughter, which a new fit of coughing immediately cut short. Then for several minutes she lay back with closed eyes, while Ulrica clasped her hands and prayed that she might relapse into that semi-slumber which for the last two days had been the only approach to rest. Almost she hoped that her prayer was heard, when the strangely brilliant eyes opened wide upon her once more.

'It is too dark here,' she said, in a voice which seemed suddenly to have grown stronger. 'I have something to show you. The night-light is not enough; it must be almost day—will you open the shutters, please?'

'Can't you show it me later, some other time?'

'What other time?' asked Charlotte, in the same voice.

'When you have rested a little,' said Ulrica soothingly. She knew that it was necessary to speak soothingly to fever-patients whose minds were beginning to wander, as was evidently the case here.

'I will rest when I have done what I have to do. Will you open the shutters or not?'

There were symptoms of returning excitement in the high, thin tones. Ulrica rose from her knees and walked to the window. To humour her would, after all, be the safest course.

How grateful was the fresh air on her face as she threw back the shutters! The sun had not yet risen, though a little of its overflowing light was already welling up over the brim of the horizon, as wine that has been too generously poured runs over the edge of its cup. The trees in the park of the Old Hall have not yet awakened from their dreams; lifeless, lightless, shadowless they stand in their midsummer wealth of leaves, not stirred yet by a single bird's wing nor enlivened by the buzz of even one of the many busy insects that have been humming about them all yesterday. On the grass blades millions of heavy drops are hanging, dull grey glass as yet, waiting only for the first beam that shoots over the horizon to be struck into diamonds and rubies and opals, more costly than any that ever adorned the crown of any earthly king.

Ulrica took one long look at the young morning, then walked back slowly across the room to the bed where Charlotte lay waiting for her.

CHAPTER XLI.

CHARLOTTE'S LAST FAILURE.

As her eyes sought that face upon the pillow it was all that Ulrica could do to disguise her start of consternation. The grey light that comes before dawn revealed secrets which the dim flame of the little wick floating in oil had been too feeble to betray. Who that has once looked upon the face of Death can ever again mistake his approach? This that stood written on Charlotte's so weirdly pinched, so grotesquely shrunken features was familiar to Ulrica; she had spelled the same lesson from off her father's face, when handsome, light-hearted Emil Eldringen had lain himself down in the best bedroom of the 'Golden Sun' at Glockenau; Pater Sepp's withered brow had told the same tale on a certain desolate day of August, now nearly two years past; even her mother's face bore to her recollection that unmistakable stamp which had been upon it when last with childish eyes she gazed thereon.

But apart from that common feature which gives so uncanny a look of kinship even to countenances most radically unlike, there was something in Charlotte's face which Ulrica had never seen in the face of any dying person. It was that same eagerness which had struck her at the moment when she surprised Charlotte standing behind the screen, and which the growing light now more fully revealed; an eagerness so intense, so devouring that it was stronger even than the fear of death, lighting up the wasted features into something that might have been mistaken for gladness. More than once within the last few days Ulrica, meeting Charlotte's eyes fixed upon her, had been puzzled by their expression of mingled watchfulness and scorn and

—was it triumph, that third element which had vaguely haunted her? Triumph undoubtedly; there was no room left now for puzzling or doubt; what had hitherto betrayed itself in passing gleams now blazed up full, unmasked and unrestrained.

‘Come nearer,’ said Charlotte as Ulrica approached the bed.

‘Nearer still.’ Her voice shook with impatience. ‘Not there, no, the light is at your back; I want to be able to see your face.’

Ulrica moved round to the spot she indicated.

‘Tell me,’ and she looked up into Ulrica’s face with curiously cunning blue eyes, ‘do you like being rich?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Ulrica readily, speaking as one might speak to an unreasonable child. ‘I think everybody likes being rich.’

‘And you think you are very rich, do you not?’

‘Possibly so. Didn’t you say just now that you wanted to show me something? Because when you have done I think I had better shut the shutters again and you might try to get to sleep.’

‘Immediately. How much money do you imagine that you have got?’ She spoke huskily, with pauses after every two or three words, yet perfectly audibly.

‘I can’t tell you exactly. More than I know what to do with, at any rate.’

‘How amusing it is to hear you talk,’ said Charlotte, very quietly and very distinctly, ‘when all the time you are a beggar.’ She had laid one arm behind her head and looked up at Ulrica with half-closed eyes, a cold, cruel smile curving her bloodless lips.

‘Am I? Well, I think that a beggar with seventy thousand a year—or is it eighty?—is not much to be pitied.’

‘But you have not got eighty thousand a year, you have got—simply nothing at all. Just what you had the day you first came to Morton—the clothes on your back—that was about all, was it not?’

‘Dear me!’ said Ulrica, smiling a little at the curious shape Charlotte’s delirious fancies were taking; ‘has the Nevill fortune gone quite to smash?’

‘Not at all, it is all there, but it does not belong to you; it never belonged to you for a moment.’

‘Doesn’t it? This is very funny. Who on earth does it belong to, then?’

Charlotte paused for one little moment, as though loath to cut short the pleasure she was enjoying.

‘It belongs to Gilbert,’ she said at last, with a sort of deliberate slowness, a drawl that was almost ludicrous in its exaggeration. ‘To Sir Gilbert Nevyll, my husband. You have heard of him, I daresay. I think you even told me that you had met him.’

‘But he is dead,’ answered Ulrica sadly; ‘he died in the fire, you know.’

Charlotte said nothing this time, but remained looking up into Ulrica’s face, the same cunning glitter in her eye, the same cruel smile upon her lips.

‘He is dead,’ repeated Ulrica, beginning to tremble, she knew not why. ‘You know as well as I that he is dead. What makes you bring up his name now?’

‘He was not burnt in the fire, he is not dead; he is alive at this moment.’

‘Take care,’ said Ulrica, after a moment of dead silence. ‘You don’t know what that means.’

‘Don’t I? But I do. It means that you are a beggar.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ said the other under her breath; ‘you are raving.’

‘Of course you don’t believe me. Nobody ever believes what they don’t want to believe. Luckily, I can prove it. Go to that writing-table, please, and open the drawer; here is the key. The right-hand drawer, second from the top. It is empty, all except one letter. Bring me that letter, please.’

Ulrica took the key from Charlotte mechanically, and mechanically walked to the writing-table. The key fitted and the letter was there, just as Charlotte had said. Until this moment it had not even occurred to Ulrica to believe that the sick woman could be in her right senses; the sight of that letter, lying so exactly as Charlotte had described, was the first thing to give her a shock of—she knew not exactly what; it could not be called fear, though she was

still trembling, senselessly ; nor was it hope, for she had not yet begun to believe. All that she understood at this moment was that Charlotte was not, as she supposed, talking in delirium. The inference ? She did not dare to look so far. With the letter in her hand she walked back towards the bed, feeling rather dizzy. She had noticed at the very moment that her eyes fell on it that it was the same letter which she had held in her hand once before, and which had momentarily arrested her attention : the letter with the French postmark and the curiously stiff handwriting on the cover—the same which had reached Lady Nevill on the evening of the ice-ball.

Charlotte was still lying with her head propped on her arm, the icy smile still stamped on her lips, and apparently never having faded for a moment.

'No, thank you,' she said, as Ulrica held the letter towards her, 'I know it by heart. I don't want to read it myself, I want to see *you* read it.'

Then, in utter bewilderment, still standing by Charlotte's bed, closely watched by her eager eyes, not knowing what to expect, having scarcely shaped a guess in her mind, Ulrica took the letter from the envelope and read :—

'JUNE 18, 1883.

'Whether I am acting wisely or not in taking the step I have resolved on I do not know. At this moment I am dead to the world, and dead to you, and personally I should have greatly preferred to remain dead, but circumstances threaten to become too strong for me. Do not be alarmed—I have no intention of reappearing in your life, and, unless you choose it, no one but yourself need ever know that I did not find a nameless grave in the Vienna fire. It was not my fault that I did not, God knows ! Judging from the tone of our last interview, I imagine that I shall be able to continue my present existence undisturbed by any overwhelming desire on your part to see my face again. But to come briefly to the object of this letter : though virtually dead, I am, strangely enough, not utterly out of reach of English newspapers, and from one of these I have lately learnt that the widow of

the unfortunate Gilbert Nevyl is about to unite her lot with that of a certain Mr. Rockingham. That under these circumstances this communication will be to you a painful shock, I am well aware, but as an honest man, even though a supposed-to-be-dead one, I have no choice left. It is the only means of saving you from a much more painful shock in the future, for as I am not contemplating suicide, and as, despite the efforts to remain *perdu* which I intend to continue, the discovery of my existence any day is a mere matter of accident, I do not think it would be fair to you to let you walk blindfolded into bigamy. For the rest, act as you think fit; in taking the bandage from your eyes I believe that my duty is performed.

‘As to how I come to be writing to you at all, instead of lying in that nameless grave which by common consent has been assigned to me, as well as to the motives which have prompted me to the course of action I am now pursuing, no doubt you will forgive my reticence on the subject. When last I saw you, you told me, if I remember rightly, that I am eccentric; put it down to my eccentricity, by all means. I imagine that the mere fact of my existence will cause you such a disagreeable surprise that in itself it will overshadow all curiosity as to details.

‘GILBERT NEVYLL.’

Ulrica’s eyes followed the words closely down to the very signature, and yet in this first moment of bewilderment the sense of them scarcely quite penetrated to her brain. Neither was it necessary that it should do so; the handwriting was enough, for in the moment she had unfolded the paper she had, with a shock of awful joy, recognised that the address on the envelope had been, as she guessed, disguised. It was the characteristic sweep of the C’s, the peculiar crossing of the t’s that bore in the truth upon her mind far more than the contents of the letter. As she stood there immovable, her eyes on the sheet which rustled faintly in her hand, it seemed as though, not only that watchful woman beside her, but even the very air around, were holding its breath in expectation of what was to come. The sleeping house was only just beginning to stir; a door

was being unlocked downstairs, and the sweep of a distant broom, wielded by the hands of some exceptionally early rising housemaid, was to be heard at the far end of the passage.

When Ulrica, with staring eyes and parted lips, had reached the last word on the page she staggered and fell, with a cry so sharp that it might have been of horror, upon the chair beside her, flinging her arms over the back and hiding her face upon them.

'Do you understand now why I am glad to die?' laughed Charlotte exultingly. 'I couldn't speak till I knew I was dying, because I never could have borne to see that man again. Do you feel my revenge at last?'

She struggled into a sitting posture, her voice rising sharp and high in the excitement which had now grown uncontrollable.

'Do you still think that he will marry you? I know him better; he loves you, yes, but he loved me too, and yet he gave me up when I was poor; he will give you up, now that you are poor—oh, I know him. Do you understand now, how I have struggled? I thought of telling Basil first, but that would not have been the same; I wanted to see your face, I wanted to *taste* my revenge, to—'

She broke off suddenly, with the very words upon her lips. Ulrica had raised her face from the back of the chair where it had lain buried.

'What do you mean?' asked Charlotte, her lips dropping suddenly apart.

'Thank God! Thank God! He is alive, that is enough; oh, thank God!'

It was all that Ulrica could say; she said it over again in a reiteration that sounded senseless. That look of stony astonishment which had borne the appearance of dismay was melted now; the tears were running down her cheeks, but they were tears of an almost ecstatic joy. There was no possibility of mistaking their source.

'What do you mean?' asked Charlotte again, almost stupidly, having stared at her for a minute, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. 'What are you thanking God for?'

'For having given him back, for having spared him.'

God has been very merciful, but oh, Gilbert, Gilbert, how cruel you have been!’

‘Gilbert? I don’t quite understand. Is it not Basil whom you love?’

Despite the gloom of that prophetic shadow which brooded over the sick-chamber, Ulrica burst into a loud laugh. The idea of her being in love with Basil was too much for her overstrained nerves.

‘Mr. Rockingham? Oh, good gracious! Oh, how terribly funny! Don’t you know that it is Gilbert who has driven me almost mad by pretending to be dead? That for two years past I have understood nothing, felt nothing, breathed nothing but Gilbert? No, no, of course, how could you know? It is Gilbert whom I love, my cousin, your husband—oh, what am I saying? Thank God! Thank God!’

‘Then this too is a failure,’ said Charlotte in a curiously dry, flat voice, as she sank back rigid among her pillows.

Ulrica seemed to have forgotten her existence. With those tears of happiness still running down her cheeks and the letter half-crushed in her hand, she walked unsteadily to the window. A sort of mental drunkenness had come over her; she clutched the sill with her two hands in order to keep upright, and leant her forehead against the pane. The last five minutes had transformed the scene outside so as to make it scarcely recognisable. The first ray had overshot the brim of the horizon, and, as under the touch of a fairy wand, the dull grey drops had been turned to priceless gems, the ivy along the house-wall was alive with the flutter of birds. Yet what was it all to the change which had come over her life since she had looked out on this same prospect just now?

It was Charlotte’s voice that roused her from her trance. She had started up again from out of her rigid posture, and with burning cheeks and fever-stricken eyes was gazing wildly about her.

‘Ah, you are here still?’ she uttered rapidly. ‘I thought you were gone to see after your own affairs; you imagine I am as good as dead already, do you not? But no, no, I am not dead yet—I do not want to die now—why

should I? There are two people in the world whom I hate, my death will make them happy—no, no, it would be madness to die now; I want to live in order to rob them of their happiness. Do you hear? I want to live. Send for Sir William Parner—why is Sir William Parner not here yet? You said that he might yet give hope. Why don't you send for him?' and she clutched at Ulrica's arm.

'I have sent for him,' said Ulrica as she sought to unclasp Charlotte's fingers. 'Be quiet; I shall not let you die, if I can help it.'

'Swear that you will not! You said that you would nurse me. I shall do everything that is required of me; I shall be quite still, I shall not speak a word, only don't let me die! I want to live, I want to live!'

CHAPTER XLII.

THE BEGGAR-MAID.

SHE wanted to live, but the decree had gone forth that she must die.

Though Sir William Parner arrived punctually, it was only to cast a haughtily inquiring glance at his lesser colleague—a glance which seemed to say: 'What on earth has made you waste my precious time by sending for me?' And before another dawn had risen, that despairing hold upon life had perforce been relaxed, and poor Charlotte, with all her spasmodic passion, her sterile cravings, her ineffectual vehemence, had brought her unsatisfactory life to an unsatisfactory close.

On her last evening upon earth Mr. Rockingham was, at her request, summoned to her side—he was staying at the Morton inn hard by, having telegraphed for extension of leave on the morning after the catastrophe on the 'marsh'; but what passed between these old lovers during the five minutes that the interview lasted was never known in its details.

Until all was over Ulrica stood firm to her post. After

the one irrepressible burst of excitement a great and solemn quiet had come over her, partly, no doubt, the effect of bodily exhaustion, for it was now four days since the eventful evening on the 'marsh,' and the four nights had been broken and disturbed. She had spoken to no one yet of the contents of that letter which Charlotte had shown her, and it was not till the day after the funeral that she sent for Mr. Dunnet.

Mr. Dunnet spent an hour closeted with Countess Eldringen, and left her presence with a countenance so deeply disturbed that the footman who showed him to his carriage felt it incumbent on him to carry the result of his observations to the servants' hall, where it afforded food for numberless surmises.

'The—most—extraordinary—thing that ever came within my experience,' Mr. Dunnet kept repeating to himself as he drove away from the door, slapping his two knees alternately, and occasionally, by way of a change, running his ten fingers through his wreath of hair. 'And after the care with which we conducted the investigation! Supposing it's a hoax?' But with a shake of his perplexed head he rejected the idea of the hoax, for he knew Sir Gilbert's writing as well as Ulrica did, if not better, and the evidence of that letter which she had showed him was simply unassailable. Without that letter spread under his very eyes he never would have consented to accept the resignation which she had just tendered to him of all the Nevylle possessions, beginning with the keys of the safe and ending with the very rings which, despite his demurring, she had pulled off her fingers.

'You surely don't expect me to wear other people's jewels?' she asked, smiling into his face with a serenity which only perplexed him the more. 'Don't you understand that I am an impostor, an adventuress? Until I was given this letter to read I was an innocent impostor, but from this moment onward I become a guilty one. How can you reconcile it with your duty to encourage an impostor? You will have to leave me the travelling money, of course, but that is only because I couldn't get away from here otherwise.'

‘Travelling money?’ said Mr. Dunnet, in sore distress. ‘I entreat you to do nothing precipitate. Surely you will wait until—’

‘No, I will wait for nothing. Why, every day that I pass under the roof of Morton Hall as its mistress should by rights be brought to the notice of the police. I shall leave before the end of the week.’

‘But where on earth will you go to?’

‘Back to where I came from.’

‘But Countess, Countess,’ groaned the family lawyer, striding up and down the room in growing agitation, ‘do you not see that by your abrupt withdrawal from the scene my position becomes most painful?’

‘Possibly. But by my remaining on the scene my own position would be considerably more painful.’

‘This letter does nothing but prove Sir Gilbert’s existence; it does not give us the shadow of a clew to his whereabouts. The only thing to go by is the Paris postmark, and that simply tells us that wherever he may have chosen to hide himself away it certainly is *not* at Paris. He may be at the antipodes for aught we know.’

‘You must look for him,’ said Ulrica gently, whereupon Mr. Dunnet relapsed into a discouraged silence. He had looked for him once before, and how signal a failure that attempt had been was proved by the letter with the Paris postmark. For a man in whom loyalty to his employers stood in the stead of all earthly passions, the position was undoubtedly acutely embarrassing. To whom was his loyalty due now? To the man who had voluntarily abdicated his rights? Or to this young woman who smilingly designated herself as an adventuress?

‘The—most—extraordinary—thing,’ he repeated again and again, with four distinct gasps of astonishment, as he looked back at the interview. ‘And the most extraordinary part of the extraordinary thing is that she doesn’t seem to mind it a bit.’

Though Ulrica had spoken in a general way to Mr. Dunnet of leaving before the end of the week, her plans had in reality already assumed a much more definite shape. Scarcely was the back of the family lawyer well turned

when she proceeded to pack her box—not one of the elegant trunks fitted up with all the luxurious appointments of the age which had accompanied her back from London, but the little shabby old box containing the greater part of her former possessions, and which had been forwarded to her from Glockenau last autumn, at the time when she formed the resolution of not returning to Austria. She did her packing with closed doors, and it was not till the last thing at night that the brougham was ordered to meet the eight o'clock train next morning. Her escape from Morton was, if possible, not to be discovered until she was safe out of reach.

Punctually at half-past seven she was stealing down the big staircase with her veil pulled over her face. The household was not well awake; the big hall in which the two long rows of servants had astonished her so much on the evening when she had taken possession of Morton Hall now stood deserted; yet with what a different step she crossed it to-day than she had crossed it then! How much more beautiful the Morton Park seemed to her now that she stood on the doorstep, gazing at the glorious glades, and knowing herself to be a beggar, than on that day when she had first set eyes on its splendours believing that they were all her own! 'He lives! He lives!' It was the constant undercurrent of her thoughts, ringing like a melody night and day through her brain and through her heart.

'Now for Glockenau!' And she drew a deep breath as the door shut behind her and they bowled out smoothly on to the gravel.

But the road to Glockenau was not quite so open as she had imagined. There was one more obstacle in the path to be cleared, one more duty to be performed, the last somewhat bitter fruit to be gathered of a seed which had been sown perversely and at random.

Already when Ulrica emerged on to the little narrow platform of the Morton station, and perceived that its only occupant was a well-dressed gentleman standing at the extreme end with his back towards her, she was aware of a sinking about the heart, and when he turned and she saw

that she had rightly identified that prosperous breadth of shoulder, there was nothing to do but to resign herself to her fate.

Mr. Rockingham's face, as he advanced down the platform towards Ulrica, was stamped with the austere gravity of the man who has wound himself up to a pitch. It was not the expression of the anxious lover, nor was it that of the lover who rejoices over the happiness which lies just within his grasp; no, it was the look of one who after much self-questioning and searching of soul has come to a resolution and means rigidly to adhere to it. In truth, it had taken him eight full days to ripen the resolve, and the chance discovery of how very nearly the opportunity for acting upon it had slipped through his fingers had only added to the air of desperate resolution which sat upon his features. By what chance Mr. Rockingham had got scent of her proposed flight Ulrica never knew. Lovers, even such lovers as he, have got ways and means of their own of following the movements of those whom they adore.

Considering that at the moment when Ulrica stepped on to the platform the train was due in exactly six minutes, Mr. Rockingham wisely lost no time in preambles. He waited only until they were out of earshot of the spot where the solitary porter of the place was mounting guard over Ulrica's shabby trunk, and then, in a voice which had wonderfully few catches in it, he tendered her an offer of his hand and of his heart. He had felt drawn towards her, he explained, ever since the moment of their first meeting; he admired her deeply; and he believed that she possessed qualities which would enable her to fill the position required of her and to ensure his personal happiness.

Ulrica was more disturbed than she could have believed possible. In theory this so choice and measured speech would have been a delicious joke to laugh over, but, alas! she felt too guilty even to smile. With head sunk upon her breast and hands nervously clasping and unclasping, she listened to the select utterances of her wooer.

'I—I thank you,' she said, when he had successfully piloted himself to a full-stop—it could not be called a point of interrogation. 'What you say is most flattering. You

‘speak much more kindly of me than I deserve. But what you wish is quite impossible—for many reasons. I will tell you one of the reasons if you like: I would not suit you so well as you suppose; my position is no longer what it was, I am not the mistress of Morton Hall, I am a beggar. My cousin—’

‘I know; you need tell me nothing. *She* disclosed to me the secret on the evening before her death.’

Ulrica glanced up at him in genuine surprise.

‘And you mean that—’

‘I mean that I am well enough off to marry even a penniless wife.’

This surely would be the moment when—but for the presence of the station-master, who had emerged from his office to cast an eye in the direction of the expected train—this fortunate beggar-maid should have cast herself down in rapturous thanks at the feet of so generous a king Cophetua.

But the beggar-maid’s head only sank a little lower on her breast. Despite the flavour of absurdity about the situation, she felt strangely touched. So, after all, she had rated this man below his worth.

‘I understand,’ she said in a low voice. ‘You are very generous. You want to stand by me even though I have fallen from my place in the world; but I could never accept such a sacrifice. There,’ and she breathed a sigh of relief, ‘they are signalling my train.’

Mr. Rockingham gave the favourite jerk to his collar, but the gesture was not quite so steady as usual.

‘A sacrifice?’ he repeated in a tone of some perplexity. ‘That depends, you know—’

The sharp clang of the station bell ringing out close behind him cut short his words. Indeed, just for the moment, he appeared to have run rather short of that commodity. For this especial turn of events there had been no fitting speech prepared. It was altogether too unforeseen. In sight of that black smoky monster in the distance bearing down steadily upon the station it became difficult to collect his ideas sufficiently for the occasion, and the glimpse of Ulrica’s downcast profile, with the guilty red

flush and the lowered eyelashes, which was all that the thick veil afforded him, put the finishing touch to the confusion of this otherwise able diplomat's intellect. What was that she had said? A sacrifice? Even as the word sounded in his ear he became aware, to his considerable surprise and even annoyance, that there was no meaning in it. A sacrifice—yes, of course, it stood to reason that the sacrifice should have been a great, even a heroic one. And yet—

Clang! went the station bell again, and the smoky monster, grown to its full size, was puffing alongside already. Mr. Rockingham, not quite aware of what he was doing, found himself walking rapidly down the platform by Ulrica's side, and talking in breathless haste. His equanimity had forsaken him, and with it all his small affectations of manner. In this moment he rose, or—as he himself would probably have put it—sunk to the level of the ordinary, average lover. Fortune, position, the qualifications of an ambassadress, in this moment they vanished from his mind. He was aware of nothing but that face alongside, with the shadow of the eyelashes upon the burning cheek. His own face had grown white from excitement.

'I know, I know,' whispered Ulrica hurriedly, even while making her way towards a compartment she had spied as being empty. 'Forgive me, Mr. Rockingham, you have much to forgive me for; you will find some one some day who will suit you far, far better than I ever would have done. It cannot be. I gave away my heart long ago, and I have never been able to take it back again. Third class for London, please, is this right?' Bang, clang, whistle, puff—the doors have clapped to, the train is in motion, and Mr. Rockingham, feeling as though the world had suddenly turned upside down, found himself standing alone on the platform by the Morton station.

The idea of the beggar-maid having thus given King Cophetua the slip, and in a third-class carriage, too!

It would be somewhat stretching a point to say that he was broken-hearted, for the hearts of the Basil Rockinghams of the world are not made of brittle stuff; but undoubtedly he was stunned. Though the chances are that

Ulrica's prophesy will be fulfilled, and that he will some day find some one satisfactorily to fill the much coveted post of ambassadress, yet it will take him some time to recover from the shock of the first failure that has ever met him in his successful career.

The road to Glockenau was now indeed clear, Mr. Rockingham having been the last obstacle on the path; but though she travelled day and night, the journey was all too long for Ulrica's impatience, for from the moment that she had found herself fairly under way there had come over her a devouring wish to see her old haunts once more, an absolute hunger after the scent of the pine woods.

Despite this impatience there was a great peace in her soul. 'He lives! He lives!'—never for a moment was that sweet melody silent. On what spot of the earth he might be wandering, whether she would ever see his face again, whether he loved her still, all these were things which her thoughts had scarcely yet skimmed. She had no hopes, no plans, no claim to make on the future; it was enough to know that he trod the same earth which she trod, that the same sun and the same moon shone on them both, that the cold grave had him not, that those eyes which had gazed so deep into hers had not fallen into corruption.

It was strange how this new great peace which wanted all her heart to itself would not suffer near it even the slightest remnant of the old bitter feeling which had dwelt there so long. 'Perhaps, my dear, he did not mean it.' The plea used by Mrs. Meades during the conversation on the morrow of the ice-ball was not marked by any particular force of logic, and yet to Ulrica it had been wonderfully consoling. For some reason which she could not explain, she felt quite sure now that Gilbert had not 'meant' to be so false as she had accused him of being.

The dust of the journey was thick upon her clothes and upon her hair when, after two days of rattling and suffocation, she said good-bye to the railway. There was an hour yet before the well-known *Stellwagen* would be ready to start on its well-known route, and, having had her trunk conveyed to the inn, Ulrica proceeded to effect a change

of toilet. Very tenderly, very lovingly did she lift out of the depth of the box the various articles which belonged to her peasant attire, and which had lain there ever since the landlady of the 'Golden Sun' had packed them up to follow Ulrica to England. Sadly creased were they with their long repose, and rather limp to the touch, but that did not make them any less fair in Ulrica's eyes. She was beginning to feel so near home now, that the fashionably cut gown in which she had travelled oppressed her with a sense of incongruity. Why, she could see the very mountain-peaks already which had formed her daily panorama from the windows of the Marienhof; and was not the river, which here on the plain spread its waters so broadly and peaceably, laden with messages from Glockenau? As well as she could she shook out the coarse woollen skirt and plucked at the linen sleeves to rouse them from their apathy. Then she tied the black silk handkerchief round her head and smiled at herself in the glass as she did so. After all, it suited her better than any head-dress she had worn since, better than the wreath of rowan berries, and better, far better, than the diamond star which had glittered on the forehead of the ice-queen.

'And yet it is shockingly tied,' said Ulrica, shaking her head at herself; 'I shall have to work very hard to get my fingers back into practice—in this and in everything else.'

The postilion was just leading the horses from the stables when the ex-heiress to the Nevyl fortunes, metamorphosed once more into the Grafyn, stood on the steps of the inn in her crumpled peasant dress, shading her eyes with her hand as she gazed towards the mountains whither she was bound.

CHAPTER XLIII.

COMING HOME.

It was drawing near to sunset when the yellow vehicle bumped round the last turn of the road and the Glockenau church-spire came into sight. The village lay bathed in the golden haze of evening.

Ulrica did not wait till the door of the 'Golden Sun' was reached; at thought of the meeting with the keen-eyed landlady and of the clamour that would arise among her peasant protégés, a sudden fit of shyness had come over her. They were still within a couple of hundred yards of the inn when she begged the postilion to draw up, and hastily descended the rickety step.

Turning her face back the way they had just come, she commenced to walk slowly down the street towards the Marienhof, of whose walls she had only had a glimpse in passing, looking the while curiously about her to the right and to the left, searching for the old landmarks and discovering new ones at every step. Even at the moment of alighting she had noted that the fantastically rayed sun which hung as signboard over the door of the inn had received a new coat of gilding since last she had set eyes upon it. And all down the village street these signs of the flight of time were manifest. Here, surely, where this spick-and-span barn now stood, there had once been a rickety pigstye; and, ah! so the *Distelbauer* had actually afforded himself a new thatch-roof in place of the old one which had latterly been dropping off in flakes. How much breath had she wasted in attempting to persuade him to this step! Strange that he should have come round to her opinion when she was no longer there to enforce it.

Then the children, what a shove these sixteen months had given them! A sturdy, rosy-cheeked urchin whom she accosted under the impression that he could be no other than the *Apfelbauer's* Fritzl turned out to belong to

the *Apfelbauer* indeed, but to be Gustl, grown into the very semblance of his elder brother.

'*Grüß Gott!*' she called out, recognising in a little bent old woman who was coming down the road one of the most rheumatic and most grateful of her patients.

The little bent old woman stopped short with a wavering movement, and with a look almost of consternation upon her shrunken features. She was far too much astonished to return the salutation. As the tall figure with the light, elastic step passed down the road, she steadied herself upon her stick and gazed after her. If it had not been broad daylight the rheumatic Liesl could almost have sworn that she had seen the ghost of the Grafin. It is true she had not heard that the Grafin was dead, but she had gone to a country called England, which to Liesl's mind conveyed much the same idea. She supposed that in England they must lay people in very narrow graves, which would account for the creased appearance of this particular ghost.

Out of the sight of Liesl's dim eyes did Ulrica pass, beyond the last house, and ever nearer to the church. All the little humpbacked fields that nestled up there on the confines of the forest were striped with wavy ridges of new-cut hay, and the air in the whole valley was penetrated with its scent.

An irresistible desire was drawing Ulrica straight towards the Marienhof. Would it, too, be changed, as so much in the village was changed? The road which ran under its walls was so deep and so narrow that, crane her neck as she would, she had not been able to get anything like a comprehensive view of it through the limited window of the *Stellwagen*. It might be gone to ruin for anything she knew, or, at any rate, have sunk back again into the state of desolation in which she had first made its acquaintance.

A little before she reached the church, just on the same spot on which she had stood still in consternation on the morning after the flood, Ulrica got the first satisfactory sight of her old home. Yes, it, too, was changed, and the change was for the better. This substantial bulwark of granite which now surrounded the little domain quite out-

shone the memory of that rickety conglomeration of bricks long since washed away by the waters. The shutters, too, were freshly painted, and they stood open; apparently the place was inhabited. If the days of the virtuous dairyman had indeed been revived, as these symptoms seemed to imply, it was evident that the new *Pfarrer* was luckier in his choice of tenants than poor Pater Sepp had ever been.

The little steep weed-grown lane which ran beside the church-yard wall was unchanged, but the gate was new. Ulrica laid her hand upon it and gave a gentle push; it was unbarred, and she entered the enclosed space unchallenged. The moment she found herself within her steps slackened unconsciously; she trod as softly as though she were on consecrated ground.

The little toy-house to the left had grown a shade shabbier, a shade less like a toy-house than it had formerly been; but it was not in that direction that Ulrica looked, it was to the right that her eyes turned instinctively, to where between the fruit-trees she could just catch sight of the older house, with its regular eaves and rambling balcony.

On all sides the same signs of care and order—every mark of the wreck of two years ago rubbed out: the gaps in the orchard filled up, the paths and palings resuscitated. By dint of kissing them all day long the sun had succeeded in burning a faint tinge of colour into the cool green cheeks of the apples that hung in thick clusters on the branches, just within reach of Ulrica's hand. With eyes that roamed ever more curiously from side to side, and feet that moved ever slower, she advanced step by step. She had reached the garden now, *her* garden, the very same she had tended so carefully, risen up again from the dead, such as she had not seen it since the evening before the fatal storm. It was not without a shock of joyful surprise that she recognised many details of resemblance, even to the arrangement of the chief among the flower-beds. And was it not almost as though she, too, on her side, were being recognised and welcomed home? As she advanced up the narrow gravel path which led straight to the hospitably open house-door, the tall white lilies on either side bowed stiffly but respectfully, the red and the pink roses

nodded familiarly; the pansy watched her with its quiet eye, the vine tendrils beckoned from the wall, and even the little daisies in the grass curtseyed in the evening breeze like well-drilled village children. Welcome, welcome home! was what one and all said. That open door seemed to be saying it loudest of all, so loudly, indeed, that, having come to the end of the gravel path, Ulrica entered without hesitation, never stopping to ask herself on whom she might be intruding.

She drew a long breath as she looked around her in the *Stube*. This was home indeed. The tables and chairs stood exactly as she had left them, even the shelves were still in their place. There was no one in the room, but signs that the place was inhabited were visible on all sides. Ulrica made another step forward. On the shelf where she had been used to keep her plates there now was ranged a row of books; and what was that on the peg behind the door. A grey wide-awake? Surely that did not look like the head-covering of a virtuous dairyman! Another step, and a fishing-rod was discovered leaning against an angle of the wall; no, whoever lived here, it could surely be no peasant.

She was standing beside the table by this time, and with a touch of nervous expectation glanced over the articles which lay there strewn about. Some one had been busy here very recently, for a half-consumed cigar still showing a faint curl of blue smoke reposed on the edge of the table. How was it that the pocket-knife lying with open blade stirred a certain uneasy feeling of recognition somewhere deep down in her memory? Here, under her very hand, there was an open book; her eye fell on the page and she started with surprise, for it was English that was printed there. Close beside it lay a sheet of foolscap paper with a few lines written upon it. So tumultuously was her heart beginning to beat with the dread of something which she did not even clearly realise, that the lines upon the paper danced before her eyes like things possessed. It was all she could do to read the largely written title: 'Letters from a Pine Forest.' What did it mean? How could it be? What was it? How was it? She could grasp at

no clear thought. The only thing that she understood was that she must get away, must fly from here if her heart was not to choke her with its beating.

With a panic-stricken movement she turned towards the door, but it was too late—a shadow had fallen across the threshold, and a man's figure darkened the light.

For no more than the space of a dozen heart-beats did the two stand looking at each other in a dazed silence; then Gilbert Nevyll started forward with arms hungrily outstretched, but before he had reached her he stood still. She saw that those silver threads which used so lightly to sprinkle his chestnut hair had grown thick about the temples, and that the lines round his mouth had cruelly deepened. There was fire in the eyes which dwelt on her, but the head was high and the lips were sternly closed. When he spoke it was with a suppressed passion which made his voice sound rough and broken.

'Why have you come back? Why this dress? What made you leave England?'

Ulrica was trembling so violently that she was forced to take hold of the back of a chair which stood near her.

'I had to leave England,' she answered faintly. 'I had to give up everything, since I knew you were alive.'

'Ah, so I am betrayed. She has spoken. And you want to send me back to my wife and to my fortune, I suppose? But it is no use.'

Ulrica remained clutching the chair-back and staring at him. It had not occurred to her that he might not know.

'What is it?' he asked, startled by her look. 'What have you come for? Have you brought me news?'

'I have brought you your freedom,' she said, just above her breath.

'Freedom? And my wife?'

'Your wife is dead.'

'Dead?'

'We buried her last week. Gilbert, if she sinned she suffered for it. It was a terrible deathbed to stand beside.'

Gilbert turned away without a word, and made a few unsteady steps in the room. He had put one hand to his head, like a man who is trying to collect his ideas.

Once only he paced down the length of the room, and then Ulrica became conscious that he was standing by her side.

‘Ulrica,’ he said, in a sort of breathless hurry, for the passion within him, up to this instant held in leash, was tearing its bonds to tatters, ‘this is no time for empty phrases. We both know what this means; both you and I understand that in bringing me my freedom you are bringing me yourself. My love, we have waited long enough.’

And already she had fallen forward on his breast and his arms were clasped mightily around her.

* * * * *

‘Tell me,’ said Ulrica, when presently they were sitting on the bench beside the door, ‘why have you tortured me in this way? Was it to punish me for loving you that you did your best to break my heart?’

And then Gilbert told her his story since the moment of their last parting. He had been in the fire, but, as occupier of a box, had been among the first to escape. At the moment of the alarm he had jumped to his feet, and, acting upon that instinct of life-preservation which is innate in all men, had forced his way to the open air. ‘But scarcely had I reached it’—so ran his tale—‘than I asked myself what I had done this for? What could I still hope for from this life which I had so uselessly saved? What an opportunity I had lost! I struck myself on the forehead for a fool, cursing my own precipitance. It needed only that I should have tarried for two minutes, perhaps one minute longer in my box, just long enough to let the passages get blocked, and by this time it would all have been over. I turned my face back towards the burning theatre grinding my teeth with rage, and at that moment somebody pulled me back by the arm; I believe that in that first moment of enraged disappointment I was going to throw myself headlong into the arms of that ghastly death from which I had barely escaped. That first madness passed, indeed, but still I did not give up the hope that the next few hours would yet bring me the end. I

think I must have been among the first of the volunteers who offered their services to the fire brigade, and I am quite certain that none of them worked with such a will as I. Here at last was a decent way of shuffling off that mortal coil which just then I felt to be such a very inconvenient appendage, without incurring the odium of suicide.

‘At least that is what I thought. The history of the next few hours is not very distinct in my mind,—a hideous jumble of ghastly episodes, of penetrating into suffocating passages, of bursting open doors behind which half-distracted wretches were yelling for help, of dragging lifeless burdens down half-burnt staircases, of being all but suffocated by the smoke, all but scorched by the breath of the fire, and yet coming alive through it all, with singed clothes and blackened hands and face, it is true, but still alive. It was all no use, do what I would—and I was a madman that night—Death would have none of me.

‘It was far on in the night when, just as I reached the open air once more, in charge of a fainting woman, two well-dressed gentlemen accosted me with a polite inquiry as to the stage which the fire had reached, and the probable number of people yet within the walls. I gave some answer, pretty much at random, looking at them the while with a little astonishment. In the midst of all this surging crowd of gesticulating, shrieking, groaning men and women, the cool politeness of these two strangers could not fail to be somewhat surprising. I felt instinctively that these were not affectionate relatives inquiring after their missing ones, and the next minute proved that I was right. Encumbered as I was by the fainting woman, I remained for several minutes chained to the spot, and thus chanced to overhear the next few hurried phrases interchanged between the two strangers.

“He certainly went in,” said one.

“And, so far as it is possible to be sure, he has not come out,” replied the other.

“We had better divide forces,” remarked the first. “I shall watch this entrance, and you keep an eye on the dead bodies, though I hope to goodness we won’t find him there.”

“God prevent it!” replied the other, fervently. “A thousand florins reward is not to be had every day; though, to be sure, there would always be the chance of his having the jewels about his person.”

“I believe he’s out of the fire,” wound up the first just as they parted; “but at any rate, whether he is or not, I’ll stake my reputation that to all intents and purposes he will henceforward remain dead. Any scoundrel with a spark of genius would do so. Why, they’ll never quite clear up this night’s work; it’ll be Nice over again. What a chance for the disappearance trick!”

‘By this time I had without difficulty recognised the two polite strangers as two detectives. Whether they eventually secured the gentleman with the jewels or not I do not know, but it was this incident which decided my immediate future.

“What a chance for the disappearance trick!” The words stuck fast in my mind. Of course this night’s work would never be quite cleared up, I had seen enough to be sure of that; of course it would be Nice over again, with its unidentified dead, its unrecognisable corpses; and even as the two detectives mingled with the crowd, the idea darted into my mind that, unless I wanted it, I, too, need never return to the world again, any more than that thief whom that brace of detectives was hunting. To be dead in name would surely be the next best thing to being dead in reality. To cut myself loose from the old life, the old ties, the old wearisome duties, what an unspeakable relief! To cease to be Gilbert Nevyl, what a respite from despair!’

He paused for a moment, looking towards the sunset sky, and his fingers tightened over the hand that lay in his.

‘Upon the idea the resolution followed quickly. Instead of re-entering the theatre, I waited only till relieved of my burden, and then made my way through the crowd and got into the first cab I met. I drove straight to the *Sudbahnhof*, and before sunrise I was a good bit on my way to Trieste. My idea was to sail for America so as more effectually to disappear, and my choice had fallen on Trieste, as being the nearest seaport. By good luck I had

about me the supplies just sent to me from England for my Oriental journey, and all in English banknotes, so my fantastical plan was not forced to go to pieces upon any prosaic rock of pecuniary difficulties.

‘However, I never got further than the seaport, for it so happened that in the very first newspaper which I took up in the Trieste Hotel I read the announcement of my nephew Ernest Nevyl’s death. I was considerably shocked, not even having known of his illness but soon a new idea rose up and took exclusive possession of my mind. In default of poor Ernest and of myself, the proper person to enter into possession of the Nevyl fortunes could be no other than you, Ulrica. It was with savage joy that I recognised this, and from this moment onwards I discovered a new interest about the execution of that scheme which I had started on the mere impulse of the moment, and of which under ordinary circumstances I might very likely soon have tired. By remaining dead to the world I would *force* you at last to accept that money which your stubborn pride had so often rejected; I should be no longer tortured by the knowledge of your poverty.

‘But now I felt that America was too far off; I must remain near enough to take note of events, to watch you unperceived, to catch at least a distant reflection of the new glory that was to be yours. Instead of sailing for New York, I shaved my beard and went to Paris, calling myself Mr. Gilbert, and taking up my quarters in suburban lodgings. Perhaps it was risky, but the risky-looking things are sometimes the safest in reality. I knew my way about Paris well enough to avoid my acquaintances, and I calculated rightly that no one would think of looking for a missing Englishman in such an obvious place as Paris. I was in Paris when Mr. Dunnet was looking for me in Vienna, and I was in Paris when you at length went to England; and then it was that it occurred to me that there could be no better as well as no more comforting hiding-place in which to lie buried than this village in which I have been so happy and so wretched.

‘There is not much more to tell. I came here and took up my quarters in this deserted house. It was something

to live in the atmosphere in which you had lived so long. These pine trees, by dint of whispering to me about you, almost succeeded in whispering something like calmness into my mind. It afforded me a certain pleasure, too—bitter, but still a pleasure—to carry on your work, as much as possible in your spirit. By the time the wall was built and the whole place in order my funds were all gone, and since I felt I was too old to learn how to plough fields or dig up potatoes I hit upon the idea of writing for the papers. It did not answer gloriously, yet gloriously enough to eke out the necessaries of life at Glockenau. It is wonderful how much it raises a man in his own opinion, to have lived on his own labours, even if only for some half-dozen months.'

He laughed. It was the old hearty laugh she knew so well, the memory of which had tortured her so sorely, but it was the laugh of an older man.

And then there fell a long silence between them, while her hand still lay in his and their eyes dwelt dreamily upon the western sky, where the sun was being drowned in a sea of deepest amethyst and palest amber, with flakes of pearly foam crowning the rolling cloud-waves. The old elm tree beside the house stood there in broad majesty, as though all this glory were there to make a background to its trembling leaves.

'Ulrica,' said Gilbert after that silence, 'I have told you all I have to tell, but you have told me nothing yet. These dreary twenty-one months must have had a history for you as well as for me.'

She shuddered and closed her eyes.

'Let me not think of it. They are lived through, that is enough. I have been very unhappy, and I have come very near to becoming utterly worthless and utterly bad. This is what my history comes to.'

She paused for a moment, and then added:

'It was an old woman who saved me. I think she must have been sent from heaven by Pater Sepp. How is it that people say that there is no good in growing old? It was an old man who saved me from bodily starvation, and it was an old woman who kept me from going to mental

ruin. Shall I ever see her again, I wonder, to tell her what I owe her? If ever I am in England again—'

'Yes, Ulrica, you shall see her, we shall find her, you and I, we shall thank her—together. Where are you going?' for she had risen from the bench and was plucking the flowers in the nearest bed.

She turned, with her hands full of lilies and carnations.

'To one whom I shall never be able to thank again in life. Gilbert, will you come with me to Pater Sepp's grave?'

THE END.

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