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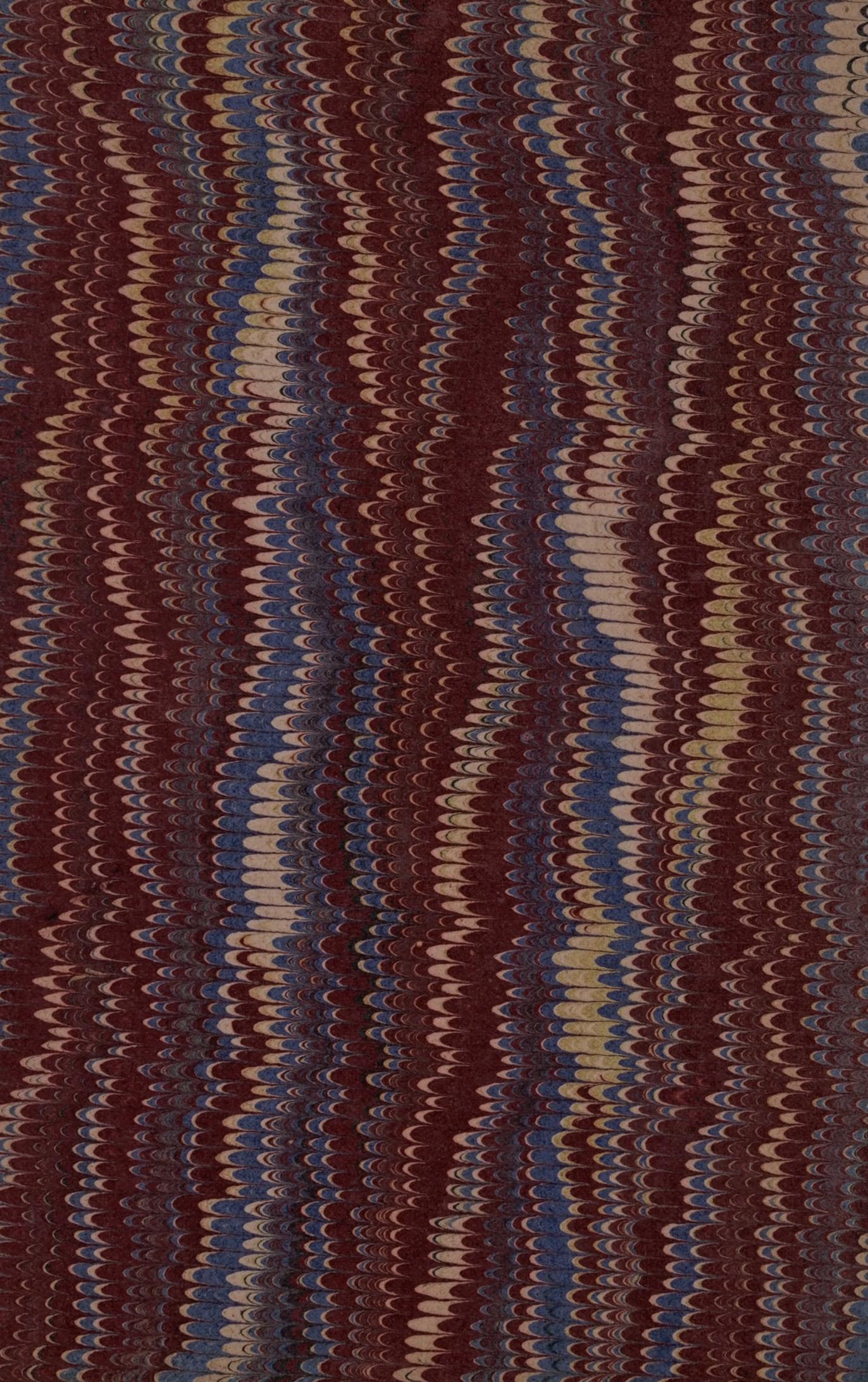
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THE

Breach of Custom

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

By Mrs. D. M. Lowrey.



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THE BREACH OF CUSTOM.

THE BREACH OF CUSTOM.

A NOVEL.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

Reinhold Ortmann

BY

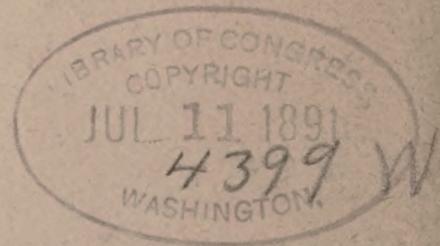
MRS. D. M. LOWREY.

WITH CHOICE ILLUSTRATIONS BY O. W. SIMONS.

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THE BREACH OF CUSTOM.

CHAPTER I.



HE oldest inhabitants of the city could not remember that the summer festival of the Artists' Union had ever been marred by rain; and the unshaken tradition of "painter's weather" was not disturbed this year. A cloudless blue sky arched above the lovely rolling country; the soft breeze scarcely moved a leaf, and the July sun shone steadily and hot in the firmament. The picturesque ruins of the old fortress on the Rauhenstein had this year been selected as the central point for the festivities, and the quiet park by which it was surrounded had been vocal since early morning with cries expressive of the joy and happiness with which many youthful hearts were overflowing.

Not without reason did the old South German capital enjoy the reputation of being the most hospitable of German cities. For weeks the town had talked of nothing else but the approaching festival, and on this morning happy groups attired in their Sunday best were hastening from all directions to the forest of the Rauhenstein. There was indeed enough upon which to gaze and at which to be astonished; glittering processions with their gorgeous colorings, showy tournaments after the fashion of the middle ages, merry strolling singers, emulating one another, and a hundred amusing antics from picturesque ragged gypsies, those weird, wild children of nature. There was no lack of sparkling wine and foaming beer, and as the day advanced the hilarity of the invited guests and the uninvited spectators seemed to rise higher each hour.

Near the edge of the plateau upon which the gypsies had pitched their tents, stood a tall, elegant looking man in the uniform of an officer of dragoons. His attention seemed less attracted by the mad antics of the brown tribe near which he stood, than by a small company of spectators who sat around a rough, wooden table under the shade of a large linden tree, at a short distance from him. There must have been something especially absorbing in the picture, for he turned round half startled, as a friendly hand fell with no light touch on his shoulder.

“Are you lost in a poetic dream, dear Hardenegg?” sounded the sonorous voice of a blonde, bearded rider, who wore the embroidered doublet and carried the feathered hat of a herald, “or is the gray spectre of weariness hovering in your wake?”

The officer shook his head laughing. “No, I find myself very well entertained. But tell me, Brüning, are you not on the committee of arrangements?”

"Certainly I am! Have you any complaint to make to them?"

"A very serious one, although I, as a guest, have no business to criticise; but then we are old comrades. Tell me in confidence where were your eyes when you made this selection of princesses and noble dames for your mumming?"

"Where were our eyes? Well now, I think there was no lack of beautiful faces."

"All honor to your taste, you disciple of the great Phidias; but the most beautiful which I have seen have not been among the participants, but among the lookers-on."

"I am indeed greatly surprised, yet you had the name in the regiment, in my time, of being a connoisseur. Perhaps I can learn something from you."

"Won't you be good enough to show me the object of your admiration?"

"Look over yonder, Brüning! That old man with a lion's mane under the linden yonder, is guarding them. They resemble one another but little, and yet they appear to be sisters."

The eyes of the blonde sculptor followed the direction indicated by his friend, and his bright face grew earnest. "You are right," he answered, "they are undoubtedly very beautiful faces, although the younger is but a child yet. But we should have asked in vain for any assistance from them."

"Are they so aristocratic? I should have judged otherwise from appearances."

"It is not their rank which restrains the father and his daughters from taking an active part in the festivities. They have other reasons for wishing to lead a quiet and retired life."

"Ah! I understand, too poor! Is the father an artist? He looks like one!"

"Yes. Have you ever heard of the historical painter, Balthasar Stiller?"

"I am ashamed to confess, I never have. Is the man celebrated?"

Brüning laughed significantly. "That is as you take it. Every one knows him here; as a painter and as a man, he is eccentric. He lives only for his art, for what he calls his ideal, and the only misfortune is that he cannot live by his ideal. His talent is great enough for him to create a position for himself in the world of art, but he has a firm conviction that he was born to be a reformer. When he was a young man he created something of a sensation by painting a saintly picture after the manner of Raphael, and since then no misfortune or disappointment can move him to abandon that school."

"He seems altogether a singular person. But if he cannot find purchasers for his pictures how can he live and support a family?"

"That is the secret. Or we are to treat it as such. He draws for some of the illustrated papers, and his daughter Elfriede—"

"Elfriede? Is that the young lady with the magnificent hair, which shines like spun gold in the sun?"

The sculptor threw a searching side glance towards his enthusiastic friend.

"Yes," he said, slowly. "That is she. You have apparently studied her closely already!"

"Is that a crime?" asked the officer, with a good-humored laugh. "Where shall we go to admire the beautiful if not to an artists' festival? But I interrupted you, what about the golden-haired Elfriede? Does she paint, too? or perhaps she is a writer of romance!"

"Neither the one nor the other. But she is the good

angel of the family. I heard that her mother died when she was fifteen years old, and since that time all the care and responsibility of the little household have devolved on her tender shoulders. And that means much when we consider the small income which her father earns. She must indeed be mistress of all household arts, for I know no pleasanter home in the whole city."

"Singular, isn't it? She certainly doesn't look like a little house-wife. There seems to me a great deal of pride and nobility in her appearance. Are you acquainted with the family?"

"Slightly. I have had some little intercourse with my fellow artist."

"Will you be good enough to present me to them? I hear the music beginning for a little dance in the meadow back of us, and I should like to invite one of the young ladies to dance with me."

Brüning hesitated. His friend's request was little to his taste, but Hardenegg was his guest and would have some ground for resentment if he refused so seemingly trifling a service.

The two men turned towards the little table, and when their approach was observed by the little party there was a movement of evident surprise.

"Permit me to present to you my friend, Lieutenant Baron von Hardenegg," said the sculptor, turning towards an earnest looking old man, with flowing white hair. "The historical painter, Herr Stiller, and his family."

"Very pleased," murmured the wrinkled old man in a deep tone which sounded anything but encouraging, and then as if his duty to politeness demanded it, he turned to his children and named them. "My daughters, Elfriede and Marguerite—my son Ewald. We

should be rejoiced to have your company, gentlemen, but we are on the point of leaving."

And as if in corroboration of his words he caught his broad brimmed hat which lay on the bench beside him.

"Going?" asked Hardenegg, seemingly resolved not to be rebuffed by the unfriendly reception. "I suppose you are off for a little walk. I see by the programme that the refreshment tables in the court will be ready in fifteen minutes."

Balthasar Stiller looked almost savagely at the speaker.

"Refreshments? What do we care for them? It is a great pleasure to have a bottle of Moselle set before you and hear the champagne corks popping in every direction around you. The father of a family cannot throw his money around like you young people. Come, children, I know a little inn above here, where we can satisfy our hunger, without encountering the pitying glances of my honored colleagues."

The Lieutenant turned towards Elfriede and said, with a polite bow :

"Pardon me, but perhaps you will have the goodness to give me one dance before you go; the gypsy band is playing on the meadow behind the castle. The music and the place are both romantic enough to induce one to try the experiment—"

A slight flush rose to the face of the beautiful girl, as her blue eyes met the admiring glance of the young officer, but her answer betrayed neither embarrassment nor diffidence.

"I never dance, Lieutenant, and even if I did, I could not possibly keep my father waiting for me."

She bowed graciously, and laid her hand upon her father's arm. Hardenegg pressed his lips together. This second rebuff affected him much more unpleasantly than the first.

With a bow he stepped back silently from the table.

Elfriede did not look up as she passed by him with her father. But her younger sister, a slight girl scarcely sixteen years of age, flashed upon him from her roguish looking eyes a glance of intelligence, which contained a silent invitation he did not understand. He looked after the little family, the last of whom was the son Ewald—a tall, well-built lad of about seventeen, with dark, curly hair—until they had all disappeared behind the shrubs and trees ; then he turned with an impatient motion towards his friend.

“A wonderfully amiable man, this historical painter ; and he evidently rules his daughters with an iron hand.”

Brüning gave a significant laugh, and as they walked away together, began to banter Hardenegg in his good-natured fashion :

“I have never introduced any one to them until now, yet I could have told you beforehand the result of our advances. Balthasar Stiller has an irrational pride, and he regards all new acquaintances with distrust. You will do well, my friend, to look for a more approachable divinity to whom to offer your homage.”

Hardenegg made no answer, and did not again revert to the Stiller family while in his friend's company. But at the jolly artists' table he sat in his place, quiet and reserved. While the merriment of those around him rose higher and higher, he remained silent and lost in thought, giving only careless and irrelevant answers to questions which were occasionally put to him by friends on his right and left. When the meal came to an end, he slipped away quietly from the castle, evidently preferring to join the crowd who were gazing on the dancers, to mixing with his carousing acquaintances. He walked alone for some time among the ruins, with an air of determination in his step and bearing, watch-

ing the direction taken by the Stiller family several hours before.

The glorious summer day was drawing to a close, and the setting sun flecked the heavens with streaks of red.

Already many were turning their faces towards their homes in the city, and with a low sigh Hardenegg gave up the hope of coming across the painter's family again on that day. Suddenly he heard his name called from behind, in a low, clear-toned voice. He turned around and was astonished to see that the call had come from Elfriede's pretty, brown-eyed sister. Her cheeks were flushed as from a swift run, and her happy face wore an expression of charming confusion.

"You, Fräulein Stiller?" asked the Lieutenant. "Has an accident befallen any of you?"

Marguerite laughed, and her eyes sparkled.

"Oh, no! They will soon be here! I only ran on ahead, because—because—"

"Well, because—?"

"Oh, you will think I am very childish, and very indecorous! Do you know where I can find Herr Brüning?"

"I am sorry to say that I cannot tell you. But perhaps I can serve you in his stead. Will you not make me happy with your confidence?"

"Yes, I will, for except Herr Brüning you are my only acquaintance here and I do so want to dance—just once!"

"And do you believe I would resign that pleasure to my friend? Take my arm, Fräulein; I value the chance that has thrown me in your way."

With innocent confidence she accepted his invitation, and went by his side to the dancing place. Her beautiful face was lighted up with pleasure, as Hardenegg laid his arm around her waist, and her small feet began

keeping time to the inspiring rhythm of the gypsy music. Surely she had never before been led to dance by so elegant a cavalier ; her breath came quickly and she wished that this dance might last for hours. It seemed as if the Lieutenant had read the wish in her eye. No other couple danced so long as they, and it was only when the last notes of the music were sounding that he led her breathless to a seat.

“ Ah, that was delicious, I thank you, Lieutenant,” she whispered. “ But I feel quite exhausted, everything is going around before my eyes.”

“ A glass of lemonade will make you feel better. Excuse me for a moment and I will go and bring you one.”

He pushed his way hastily through the crowd, but it was several minutes before he was able to return with the cooling drink.

But Marguerite was not alone now. Elfriede was standing by her side, and to judge from the younger sister's dejected appearance, had been reproving her severely. Hardenegg felt it his duty to shield his little partner from blame. He bowed politely to Elfriede and said : “ I have to apologize for carrying off your sister for a little while. You see, I have returned your treasure to you well and sound, my dear Fräulein.”

“ Marguerite did very wrong to leave us ; she knew that we would be anxious as soon as we missed her.”

The offender pursed her lips into a pout.

“ Dear me ; I am not a child ! And I have never heard that it was a sin to dance.”

There was something very fascinating to Hardenegg in Elfriede's unapproachableness. Her austere manner prompted him to answer in a haughty tone.

“ It is not indeed, my child,” he said, “ and I trust

your severe preceptress will afford additional proof of what I say by giving me the next dance."

"I have already told you, Herr von Hardenegg, that I find no pleasure in it, and—"

"And you did not wish to keep your father waiting," he replied, unmindful of her reproachful glance, and in rather a sneering tone. "I well see, that to-day it is my fate to encounter refusals. But you ladies will at least suffer me to accompany you back to Herr Stiller."

Elfriede turned abruptly and went on ahead quickly, without deigning to answer, but Hardenegg gave his arm to Marguerite, who looked up to him thankfully, and whispered: "When my father chides me, you will say a good word for me, will you not? And you must not think ill of my sister; she is an angel, and a hundred times better than I? I cannot understand why she treats you so cavalierly."

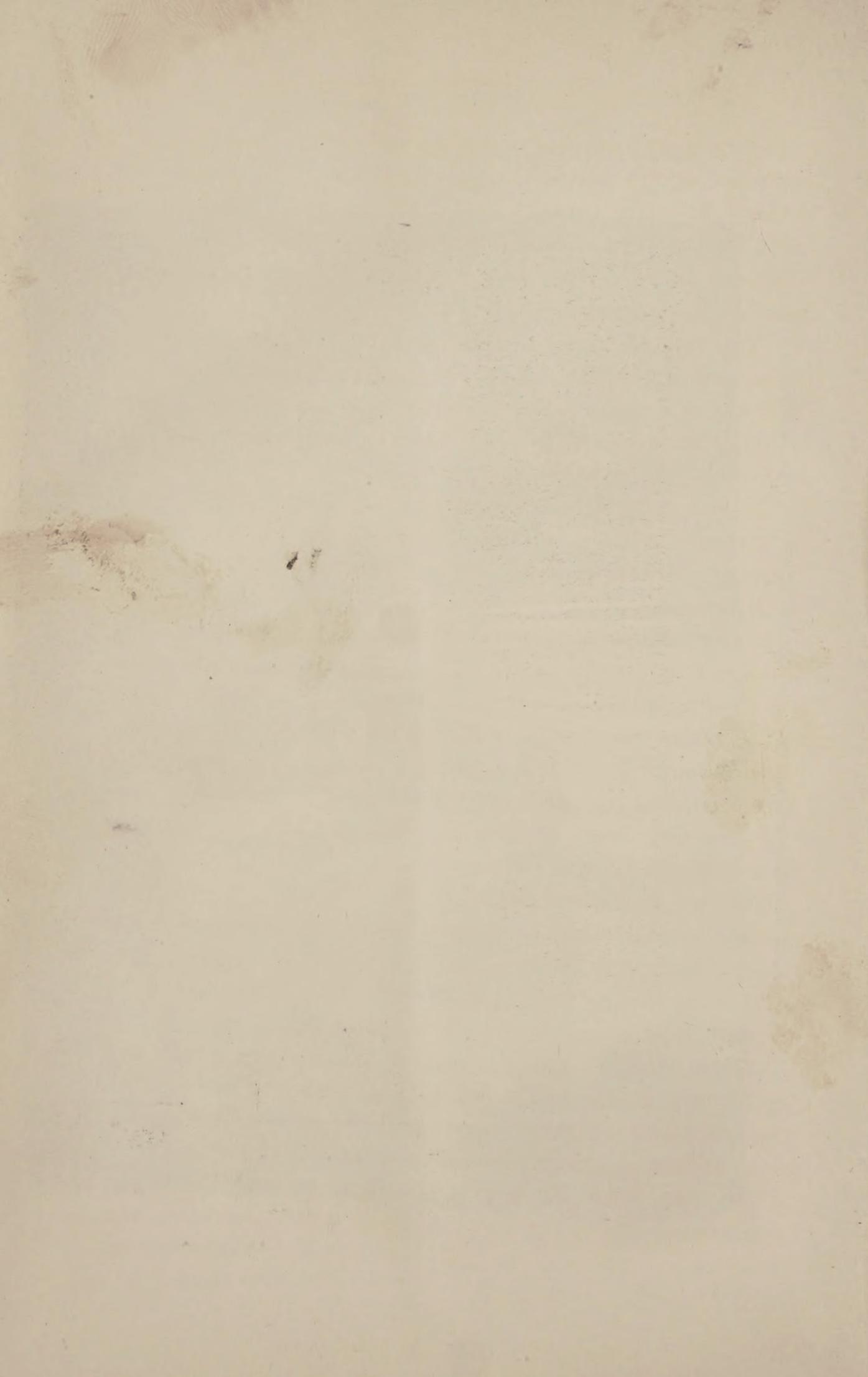
They turned aside towards the spot where a great crowd of carriages were standing. There stood the gray-haired painter in lively dispute with the driver of one of the most miserable and shabby looking of vehicles.

"It is all nonsense!" said the man. "Why in the world should I take the roundabout way across Liebenau? It takes at least a half hour longer, and it is the worst turnpike in the whole region."

"That makes no difference to me," responded the historical painter, testily. "Either you take us as I direct, or I will look for another carriage. Shall I allow these young artists who have already looked at me with contemptuous eyes, to have the pleasure of passing me on the road in their fine equipages, while we drag over the ground in that apology for a carriage? No, no; but you can have an extra thaler for your trouble."



“REFRESHMENTS!” SAID BALTHASAR STELLER, “WHAT DO WE CARE FOR THEM.”—See Page 12.



This offer proved more efficacious than any argument, and the driver made no farther objection. Stiller looked around for his children, but did not seem disposed to rack his brains over their whereabouts. Just then Lieutenant von Hardenegg and the two girls, Elfriede leading the way, came up to him.

"We can start at last," he said. "I think, after wandering aimlessly about for hours, as we have been doing, that we will agree that we have had more than enough of this charming festival. I have never been so tired in my whole life as I am to-day."

He was helping his daughters into the carriage while he spoke, and now climbed in the creaking old vehicle himself. He raised his hat in answer to Hardenegg's polite greeting.

"Good evening, Herr Lieutenant, good evening. I am glad to have made your acquaintance. Go on, driver—by way of Liebenau, remember!"

The man gave a "Hup" and cracked his whip. His poor broken-down beast gave a start as if it would fall over from fright, and then moved off on a slow trot.

A moment later a turn in the road hid the carriage from the eyes of the Lieutenant.

Slowly and thoughtfully Hardenegg turned back toward the castle. He had a feeling of compassion for this family with whom fate had dealt so roughly, and with this feeling of compassion was a sensation of another kind which he could scarcely analyse.

"What folly," he murmured, striving to put the Stillers out of his mind. "I go away to-morrow or next day and shall probably never see or hear of them again. How stupid to spend a whole day so unprofitably."

Not long after he met his friend Brüning, and they took their seats in the light, elegant carriage which was to take them back to the city. The young sculptor was

in such high spirits that he scarcely noticed the abstracted air of his companion. As the horses started off the young officer said, abruptly : "Is there no way to return other than that by which we came?"

"Yes, we can go back by way of Liebenau, but it is much longer, and a wretched road as well."

"The evening air is so refreshing, and the moon has already mounted above the tree tops. So you would get something in exchange, Brüning, for going out of your way."

"You're right enough. Coachman, we'll take the turnpike over Liebenau !"

During the first quarter of an hour the sculptor chatted gaily over the events of the day. Then he lit his cigar and threw himself back in the carriage, resting his head comfortably on the cushions, and Somnus and Morpheus soon brought him under their gentle influence. The clear moonlight gave a silver sheen to the picturesque and quiet landscape. The horses had been trotting swiftly for nearly an hour, when Hardenegg's keen eye detected a dark object in the road at some distance in advance of them.

"What do you think that is, coachman?" he asked, with rather an uncomfortable misgiving in his mind. The driver had for some minutes been conjecturing about the dark mass himself, and now answered, decidedly :

"It is a broken-down carriage ; some one has had the misfortune to be overturned."

Now, they could see under the shadows cast by the trees which lined the roadside, the figure of a man who was leading a horse and swearing vociferously. As they approached, Hardenegg told the coachman to stop, for he recognized the man as the driver who had started with the historical painter and his family.

“What has happened?” he called out.

The discomfited driver gave a surly reply.

“What would be likely to happen? My axle-tree is broken, and I don't know what other damage besides, and it's no wonder on this cursed road. The hangman take the old fool and his crazy whims.”

“Where is he? What has become of them all?”

“If you whip up your horses you will overtake them in fifteen or twenty minutes. First they waited awhile to see if any thing could be done with the carriage; then they grew impatient and decided to start on foot, which they might as well have done in the first place!”

Hardenegg gave the order to go on as quickly as possible, and looking at his sleeping friend saw that he had not been disturbed by the rather noisy halt. After about ten minutes rapid travel over the rough road they saw a group of dark figures some distance ahead of them, and a minute later heard loud voices and then suddenly a cry for help in a woman's voice.

“Drive as rapidly as you can!” cried Hardenegg to the coachman. “I think those people need assistance, and at once.”

The man urged his horses on to fresh speed.

“Yes, its a terrible neighborhood,” he said. “The workmen in the quarries about here are for the most part rough fellows, and Liebenau is a rendezvous for hard characters.”

Just here the road was soft, and there was no sound of hoofs or carriage wheels to attract the notice of the little group whom they were approaching.

Under the shadows of some great trees Hardenegg saw a crowd of men whose rough cries and loud voices did not leave him in doubt as to the class to which they belonged. Taking the whip from the coachman's hand he sprang from the carriage.

“Try to rouse Herr Brüning, if you can, and on no account leave your horses. I think I’ll be able to manage those fellows alone.”

This confidence indicated a high degree of self reliance, for there were at least a dozen rough looking men surrounding Balthasar Stiller and his children.

One of the roughest, with noisy clamor, held the old man fast in their midst ; another had caught the sunshiny Marguerite by the arm and she had bravely warded him off. No one had as yet ventured to approach Elfriede, who stood erect, her head proudly thrown back, trying if possible to come between harm’s way and her sister. She showed in the midst of that wild scene with her unprotected family around her, her intense earnestness of character.

Yet before Hardenegg had reached the group, he saw one rough fellow with more brutality than his mates grasp Elfriede by the arm. At the same moment Ewald, with the temerity of a young lion, sprang upon him, pulled him back and struck him a blow in the face. Then the curly head of the youth suddenly disappeared !

The Lieutenant had now come up to them, and before the vagabonds realized that any one was near, he was upon them. With a heavy blow he struck the first man who turned upon him, and felled him to the ground, then he forced his way into the middle of the little circle. All his anger seemed directed against the ruffian who had seized Elfriede. Twice he struck him upon the head with the heavy handle of his whip, and with such force that he fell to the ground, moaning loudly. Then the cuts fell so swiftly, keenly and indiscriminately upon the heads, arms and legs of the

scoundrels that they soon thought of nought else but escape.

The uniform of the Lieutenant, with his flashing sabre at his side, filled them with fear, and as they now caught sight of Brüning's commanding figure hastening towards them with rapid strides, they turned as one man and fled into the darkness behind the trees.

The greeting which was now given Hardenegg was, it need hardly be said, of an entirely different nature from the dismissal he had received a short time before. Balthasar Stiller shook him warmly by both hands, calling him over and over again, the rescuer of his children. Elfriede, too, had cordial words of thanks, and Marguerite, regaining again her courage and her saucy manner, said that now, at last, she knew how the brave Roland appeared after the battle of Ronceval. It was Brüning who ended all this homage which Hardenegg was receiving.

“I see dark shadows moving back there among the firs, and if those fellows should decide that they fled too quickly and come back again to renew their attack, there'll be little chance for us. You will have to take our carriage, Herr Stiller, and no time should be lost in placing your daughters in it.”

The painter hesitated about accepting Brüning's kind offer; but he knew that, after all, he could do nothing else. Just as he was going to step into the carriage he, for the first time, missed his son. They called his name several times, and at last Ewald's tall slight figure was seen emerging from among the dark trees. He had no words of thanks for the young officer and declined most decidedly to take a place in the carriage.

“I will start on,” he declared, “for there is nothing now to fear.”

But even as he spoke, his body began to sway and his

face looked deadly pale in the moonlight. Brüning supported him with a strong arm.

“What is the matter, Ewald?” he said, “are you hurt?” As if angry with himself, Ewald pressed his lips together.

“Oh! It is nothing; at the most only a scratch.”

“At all events, you must not think of going a step on foot.”

“Take your place in the carriage at once, for your delay may bring your sisters into fresh danger.”

Silently Ewald obeyed this earnest exhortation. His father however leaned over the side of the carriage once more, and called to Hardenegg:

“Good-bye, Lieutenant; I sincerely hope I shall see you to-morrow in my modest dwelling.”

The fiery horses drove off rapidly, and very soon the noise of the carriage wheels died away in the distance. The two friends followed on foot. Brüning’s fear that the miscreants would again renew the attack was groundless, and without further annoyance they reached their destination. When the pedestrians arrived at the city’s edge, Brüning for the first time broke the oppressive silence.

“You intended to start on your journey to-morrow, did you not, Hardenegg?”

“Yes, I did; but I shall probably stay two or three days longer.”

“And do you really think of paying the Stiller family a visit?”

“It would seem rude not to, after the pressing invitation I have received.”

“In spite of all that, I do most earnestly beg you not to go near them.”

The young Lieutenant frowned slightly.

“Are you in earnest, Brüning? And what are your reasons?”

“You must know them yourself, they lie on the surface. These young maidens have no other possession in the world but their good name.”

“And do you think there is any danger of them losing it, should I pay them a visit? You do not appear to hold me in very high esteem, my dear Brüning.”

“My friendly disposition towards old Stiller forces me to be candid. He has his peculiarities, but he is an honorable man through and through, and fate has used him hardly enough. I should be deeply moved if he came to grief through the actions of any member of his family.”

“Your solicitude does your good heart honor, but your exhortation has really been sent to the wrong address. I will never rob these young people of peace in their hearts or in their homes, whether I see little or much of them in the future. And now we will dismiss the subject, dear friend—I am too old to find such admonitions to my taste, no matter how kindly meant.”

They soon reached the hotel where Hardenegg was staying, and their adieus were much shorter and cooler than ever before.

Since the adventure on the high road, there had been a feeling of irritation between them, which could not be hidden beneath any outward form of civility.

CHAPTER II.

Late on the following afternoon, Hardenegg lay upon the sofa in his room at the hotel, smoking most energetically. His face wore a disturbed and discontented expression. He held in his hand a letter, which he had read carefully for the second time, and its perusal had just evidently put him in a very bad humor. It was an old-fashioned looking sheet with a gilt coat of arms stuck up in one corner, and the writing was delicate and small. It read as follows :

“MY DEAR KURT :

“I was more than disappointed not to see you as I expected yesterday, and have but this moment finished reading your letter in which you say you will remain several days longer with your quondam army comrade Brüning. I pray you to cut your visit short, for I greatly desire your presence here now. You have been absent nearly a year and my mother-heart longs to see you again. I had hoped no word from me would be necessary to bring you to my side ; but other and more important reasons underlie my desire for your speedy return. The Count and Countess Bassewitz, with their daughter Hertha, are my guests ; they came yesterday and will remain only a few days. They know that you are on your furlough, and would deeply resent the insult, if you did not hasten home at once to welcome them. You know the Count's wealth and also how difficult he is to approach. For months I have been moving heaven and earth to bring about this visit, and now when I have succeeded in getting them here, it

would be inexcusable for you to wantonly thwart my plans. The main thing to do is to win over the Count, and that, with your personal qualifications, you can readily accomplish.

“Then, after a short time, a formal and public betrothal can take place. When Bassewitz once gives his word that will end it ; there will be no taking it back.

“The Countess Hertha is just fifteen years old, she is a very lovely girl and is developing rapidly, and will soon enough find a wooer if you neglect your present opportunity. Of her qualifications of mind or heart I cannot judge, as I have seen too little of her, as yet. Her birth is undoubtedly good, and to judge from outward appearances she lacks nothing in training. She is now and then rather self-willed and unmanageable ; but her father, oddly enough, never sees anything in her conduct which requires reproof. But you will see her for yourself, and will be the best judge. The best of all is that the heart of the little Countess is yet untouched. You will resemble your father very little if you do not make her your slave in twenty-four hours.

“Need I tell you what good fortune this alliance would be to us ? Countess Hertha is the Count’s only child. Her marriage portion will be a large one, and she will be his only heir. Then this fear and trembling will be at an end for all time.

“It is just possible—and I have lulled myself into security with the hope these many years—that your uncle, Botho Hardenegg, has died without descendants, and that no one will ever come to lay claim to his inheritance. But there come to me days and hours when I am nearly driven to despair. Only think, Kurt, what would become of us if anything so dreadful happened ! We should be beggars, and who knows whether worse might not threaten us.

“I will not cast reflections on your father’s memory, but he has through his generosity and his boundless hospitality brought us to such straits that any retreat from the beaten path is now an impossibility. The only thing that remains for you to do is to make a rich, a very rich, marriage, in order that you may look all possibilities in the face without concern. I have done my best for you and have smoothed the way so far as it has been possible; but now it is for you to take the last and decisive step, and I feel certain that you will not, in youthful folly, throw aside the fruits of my unremitting labor. With anxiety and longing I await your coming.

“YOUR MOTHER.”

“Nothing but marriage plans and spectres,” Hardenegg muttered angrily to himself as he folded the letter again. “As if a man was not put out enough who had to wait thirty years before he could take possession of his inheritance, without having then to marry a child to gain security. No, my honored Mamma, a day more or less will make no difference to this very sensitive Count Bassewitz.”

He rang for his servant to assist him in making some change in his attire. He would not make his visit to the Stiller family in uniform. The people in this old residence city had rather odd ideas of their own, and the appearance of an officer at the modest dwelling of the historical painter might give rise to unpleasant comments.

Brüning had not put in an appearance during the entire day, and although Hardenegg had a conscious feeling that something had gone wrong between them, still he could not but feel grateful for his friend’s non-appearance.

It was almost dark when he stepped up to the shabby

looking house in the narrow street which had been pointed out to him as the one occupied by Balthasar Stiller. It was three stories high, and the Stiller family lived at the top. The old worn steps creaked and bent under the officer's heavy tread, and all the surroundings spoke of want and poverty. Marguerite opened the door of their apartments in answer to his knock, and gave him a cordial greeting. The rooms were small and the ceilings low, in correspondence with the old-fashioned structure of the house; but the comfort and attractiveness of this little home proved that Brüning had not spoken unadvisedly in regard to the singular old man and his family.

It was not alone the aspect of neatness which the place bore which gave to a stranger this pleasant impression, but the daintiness and good taste displayed in the arrangement and disposition of the simple furniture. There was none of that toilsome labor for effect after which so many small minds strive, imagining that the gilding will conceal the stamp of poverty.

The longer one remained in them the more home-like and comfortable he felt; even the sea of roofs and chimneys did not disturb him or make him realize he was in an attic.

"You would not believe how often my father has spoken of you already to-day," began Marguerite. "The longer he talks of last night's events the deeper the colors in which he describes our frightful position, and your great courage appears to him almost marvelous."

"And your sister?" asked Hardenegg, who had looked about the room in vain for Elfriede. "I trust the shock has not made her ill?"

"O no! she has more courage and stability than any of us, even if she does not make a point of it. She is

sitting in the next room with Herr Werner, and when they two begin talking together they forget all else. Come, Lieutenant, we will surprise them !”

Hardenegg felt a disagreeable sensation at these words which he hardly understood, and would never have admitted to be jealousy. And when Marguerite opened the door to the room in which her sister sat, the blood rushed to his heart in a ferment of anticipations. And what was the picture that met his eager eyes ?

In a little window niche sat Elfriede, her hands folded on her lap and the rays of the setting sun mingling with the sheen of her magnificent hair. A few steps from her stood a tall young man clad in dark clothing, leaning against a cupboard and looking down with an earnest expression at the face before him.

Hardenegg looked him over with a sharp glance while he yet stood upon the threshold. Certainly if this man should prove a rival it would hardly pay to begin a struggle with such an one. His figure was tall but not well developed, and consequently did not impress one, and the features of his pale, haggard face could lay no claim to beauty.

His attraction lay in the high, broad forehead, and the beauty and depth of his earnest gray eyes. But these were scarcely traits to win the heart of a beautiful maiden.

Elfriede did not show the slightest embarrassment or surprise at the unexpected entrance of Hardenegg. She rose with quiet dignity and bade him welcome.

“ My father is yet in his atelier, but I will call him at once,” she said. “ Permit me, Herr von Hardenegg, to present to you our friend, Herr John Werner.”

The officer would have contented himself with a stiff bow, but the young clergyman held out his hand with a hearty greeting.

“Your name is already an honored one here, my dear sir! You have indeed proved yourself a friend to this household.”

Hardenegg saw they had been left alone, and deliberately assumed a disdainful tone.

“I am overwhelmed, Herr Werner, by your acknowledgment of my trifling services,” he said. “You are, if I am not in error, an intimate friend of the Stiller family?”

“We are neighbors, and that is how I became acquainted with them, and I have found only kindness and sympathy since our first meeting.”

In his impulsive manner and earnest voice there was no affectation or assumption of grave dignity, such as is often the case with young clergymen.

He spoke quietly and with a friendliness that seemed too proud to notice Hardenegg's spiteful tones. The officer felt with each glance a deeper aversion for his new acquaintance, and turned with positive rudeness from him as Balthasar Stiller with cordial manner entered the room.

“I have been assuring myself that you would come,” cried the painter, in his straightforward and somewhat blustering tone. “You would not allow us to bear this load of gratitude and thankfulness without coming near us, for that would not have been magnanimous.”

Hardenegg smiled as pleasantly as he could, considering that the old man was nearly shaking his arm out of its socket. Then he begged Herr Stiller as a personal favor to say nothing more about the matter, a request to which the painter acceded with visible reluctance. Then Marguerite was called to bring a bottle of wine, and the honored guest forced himself to drink a glass of the vile decoction, although he had his suspicions that it was colored vinegar. After which he expressed a

polite wish that he might be allowed to venture within the sacred precincts of the atelier.

The historical painter was evidently in a quandary.

"You will not be favorably impressed, if you see my work by lamplight," he explained. "I have almost finished a picture which is yet on the easel, but I doubt whether you will be much pleased with it. My talent lies in another direction than in that of our soulless modern painting. I have had higher ambitions than dabbling in photography."

Hardenegg bowed assentingly.

"So I have heard before, Herr Stiller; and knowing how high is your standard in art, my desire to see your latest work is naturally very great."

"Really?" The old man cleared his throat and looked at the speaker with a mistrustful and yet pleased expression. "Well, if that is the case, I can certainly not say no. Elfriede, bring the lamp! You won't see it at its best by lamplight, though."

The young girl obeyed silently but reluctantly, as one could read in her face. The atelier was the chilliest and least attractive looking room on the whole floor. Elfriede's household duties were at an end at its threshold, and the contrast was very marked. The bare walls and the rough rafters overhead told the story plainly enough; the painter must indeed work for bread. In spite of all, Stiller exhibited the pride of a man superior to all annoyances, now that he was surrounded by his own creations; this place was to him evidently the "holy of holies."

"That is the picture," he said, shortly. "I call it 'The Vision of a Saint.'"

Hardenegg stepped up before the easel, and a single glance at the singular, hastily-done painting was enough to entirely satisfy him as to why Stiller could

find no buyer for his works. The haggard, ascetic figure of a hermit was kneeling before the entrance to a cavern, while in the clouds above was seen a very woodeny, stiff-looking angel, very unnatural and a little undecided whether to descend in the hope of finding ease below or to continue floating amidst the clouds, in her present rigid condition.

Hardenegg stood for some time looking at this picture, which was patterned after the old masters. It seemed as if the artist, both in his drawing and in his coloring, had avoided with careful design all appearance of reality, and Hardenegg did not feel that he could bring himself to praise the work without flushing; at the same time it had a certain fascination for him; the angel's face, which was clearly cut and stood out from amid her vapory surroundings, was the face of Elfriede, and the halo of golden hair which surrounded the beautiful head was at least the work of an artist. Hardenegg saw now nothing in the picture but the lovely maiden's face.

"A masterpiece," he said at last, in tones of conviction. "If the admiration of a novice in art can be of any value to you, you can rest assured that you have mine in the fullest measure. Have you a purchaser for this picture yet?"

Balthasar Stiller's eyes lighted up with childish joy. He stroked his gray beard, and after some slight hesitation said, in a voice which trembled: "A purchaser? Hum, there has been—there was a rich American who—"

He did not finish the sentence and the reason was evident. Elfriede had arrested his speech and prevented his completing the falsehood by her earnest, steadfast gaze.

Quickly and without effort the guest came to the rescue at this painful moment.

"If you have not yet made any definite arrangement, pray consider me before you do the American. I will pay you your own price."

The lamp which Elfriede still held, flickered, as though the hands which bore it trembled. The painter stared at the speaker with wide-open eyes, and an odd expression passed over his honest face.

"You—you will buy the picture?" he stammered. "Are you in earnest?"

"Certainly! I will consider myself in great good luck, if you will give me the preference."

Stiller stretched out both hands to him.

"You shall have it," he cried. "You shall have it! And you shall decide on the price yourself. Ah, you cannot know how delightful it is to find some one with a true appreciation of art!"

He was as demonstrative now in his thanks as he had been the evening before, after their adventure. Suddenly a thought came to him. "I cannot send you the picture at once," he said, "for it needs a few touches yet, but I can let you have it in six or seven days."

Hardenegg did not answer immediately. A great temptation came over him, and after a few seconds struggle with himself, he succumbed to it.

"I shall not leave the city for the next few days. Can I come and watch your finishing strokes?" he asked. "It will be highly interesting to me to see you put on the last touches."

Herr Stiller, whose temper was in fact that of a child, gave the required permission with delight, and as they left the studio, his whole manner reflected the happiness which filled his heart. Hardenegg's hope that the

young clergyman had by this time taken his departure was not realized. Herr Werner was talking earnestly with Ewald Stiller, who, the Lieutenant observed, carried his left arm in a sling.

“Is this the result of your fall?” he asked. “Are you seriously hurt?”

The youth had risen while Hardenegg was speaking, but the look he cast upon him was one of enmity and defiance.

“Yes, this is the result of my scuffle,” he answered; “but it is not worth talking about, only a trifle.”

“Only a trifle!” grumbled the father. “The doctor’s bill will be large enough. Did you ever hear of such folly, Herr von Hardenegg? Ewald was determined to walk home last night, and when he finally did get into the carriage, he fainted from loss of blood. One of those murderous villains gave him a cut in the arm which would have ended his life had it struck his breast. And now he won’t go to bed as the physician has ordered.”

Hardenegg now looked closely at the boy whom he had scarcely noticed before, and discovered that he bore a strong resemblance to his sister Elfriede. Only the black curly hair marked a difference, and his countenance wore a singularly painful and dark expression which did not sit well on a youth yet in his teens. The bravery which he had displayed on the previous evening pleased the officer greatly, and he felt himself already much interested in this earnest, silent boy; but Ewald’s reserve towards him, and the evident aversion he felt for him, were to Hardenegg incomprehensible.

But he did not worry his head long over the ill-humor of the boy. All his interest centered in the elder daughter of the house who had again retreated to the window-niche, and was soon chatting with her brother and Herr

Werner, taking little notice of the stranger and showing but slight appreciation of his generosity and politeness. He finally succeeded in obtaining a few moments conversation with her apart from the others. The young girl listened to him with visible absent mindedness; suddenly she raised her beautiful eyes, and looking earnestly at him asked: "Are you an amateur painter, Herr von Hardenegg?"

The Baron smiled in order to conceal his embarrassment.

"That is a direct question, Fräulein Stiller. I certainly cannot claim to be a connoisseur."

"And yet you were so much pleased with that picture of my father's?"

"Most assuredly—does that seem strange to you?"

"To speak honestly—yes. Among his critics he has hard work to find any admirer and still harder to get a purchaser. Will you answer me another question and be frank and honest in your reply, Herr von Hardenegg?"

The Baron bowed silently. He did not feel very comfortable under this little examination.

"Herr Brüning spoke to you yesterday about our circumstances and told you that my father's work found little recognition, did he not?"

"You force me to give you a direct answer, Fräulein—yes, he did tell me something of the sort."

"And you, out of pity, in order to assist us, have—"

Hardenegg interrupted her hastily:

"No, no, my dear Fräulein; on my word, all such ideas were far from my mind. It would not enter my thoughts to do you such an injustice. If you would only think of some other cause," he said, significantly, as he stepped near her and lowered his voice. "Can you not imagine why I came here to look at the pictures, and why that

particular one took my eye? In it I have seen nothing else but the heavenly face of—”

“It is very sultry here, Herr von Hardenegg,” the girl interrupted, with a manner of proud indifference, “if you will permit me, I will open this window.”

The young officer pressed his lips together. These repeated rebuffs wounded the spoiled darling of the fair sex in his most sensitive point, his self-love; but his young hostess so charmed him that he was more anxious than ever to break through her reserve and pride.

Elfriede had thrown open the doors of the window at which they were standing, and as they swung back, and the fragrant, quickening evening air rushed in, there came with it soft, penetrating sounds from a violin which was being played in some neighboring room. During the silence which followed Elfriede's last words, her companion listened attentively to the sweet sounds, and he was enough of a musician to recognize the instrument and to realize that the unseen artist who handled the bow so skilfully was a master of his art.

“Who is the virtuoso you have in your neighborhood?” he said, turning to his host who joined them at this moment. “I have seldom heard finer execution than his.”

Ewald, who until now, remained quietly at the clergyman's side, rose abruptly and left the room, as his father replied, emphatically:

“You need not envy me this neighbor! No human being in the whole world is so detestable to me as this cursed fiddler. You ought to see him once! I am certain that he has at least one murder on his conscience.”

Hardenegg with difficulty kept from smiling.

“Really? Is he so dangerous an individual? And do you know his name?”

“He is a Russian and calls himself Kostomarow,” said Marguerite, joining in. “He lives over there in the second story where the heavy curtains are hanging at the window. He looks uncanny enough, that is certain, and one would have a creepy feeling if they came face to face with him along a lonely road. But he’s not so bad, after all, and father was as much captivated by his music as any of us, at first.”

“Would to Heaven I’d moved out of the place the first day I ever heard that unlucky fiddle. If the fellow is not an escaped convict, you may rest assured he is the spirit of the rat-catcher of Hamelin. Here he has changed my Ewald in a few, short weeks from a fresh, light-hearted lad into a music-mad dreamer and an obstinate, sullen fellow. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if this lame devil with his fiddle would entice him away some day to live and die in misery in a strange land.”

Here lay the reason for the strained relations which appeared to exist between father and son.

“Perhaps your son has a talent for music?” ventured Hardenegg.

“Yes, he has, rather; he has inherited it from his mother, and since the white-bearded Russian has caught him in his net, he is possessed of the craze to become a musician.”

“And do you look upon that as a great misfortune, Herr Stiller?”

“Do I think it a misfortune? The very greatest, my dear sir, truly, the very greatest; but if I can have my way it will never happen. He shall never follow in his father’s footsteps. I know the sad part in this mortal pilgrimage that is played by an artist! In three months he will complete his studies at the Gymnasium, then he will go to serve his apprenticeship with a merchant;

that is settled. The world of our day belongs to the man of business."

This subject seemed to excite the old man greatly, and in order that he might no longer hear the strains of his enemy's violin, Elfriede hastily closed the window.

Hardenegg felt the necessity of choosing some fresh topic of conversation.

"And do you also share your brother's musical proclivities?" asked he, turning to Marguerite. She shook her head, and replied, laughing :

"No, indeed ; when the distribution of talents was made in this family, I was overlooked entirely. The horn of plenty was emptied upon Ewald and Elfriede. If you only know how to beg, perhaps my sister will sing you one of her heavenly songs."

"Marguerite !" Elfriede cried, reproachfully ; but of course she could not prevent Hardenegg's urgent request that she would favor him with one of her songs. She scorned any parley over the matter and rose at once. With a friendliness which was anything but gratifying to Hardenegg, she turned to the young clergyman : "Will you accompany me, Herr Werner?"

The piano, which stood in the corner of the room, was a much carved, very old-fashioned looking instrument ; but as Werner touched the keys with a firm but soft touch, the sounds which it gave forth were full and in perfect accord. Elfriede's voice had a sweetness and strength which were delightful, and her execution proved that the golden haired girl was no beginner in music. She sang one of Schumann's most difficult compositions, and as the Baron listened he recognized new beauties which he had never before heard in the oft-repeated old song. When she finished, he applauded warmly in a few well-chosen words.

"Yes, it is a pleasure to hear her," said Balthasar

Stiller, with fatherly pride. "Now you must sing a duet together. You will be delighted with Werner's voice, it is a fine baritone."

With growing uneasiness Hardenegg had now to listen to the harmonious blending of the two voices. He looked contemptuously at the haggard face of this friend of the family, and he could not conceal from himself that he had been overhasty in his judgment as to the man's insignificance. While he stood there singing, as it seemed, from the depths of his heart, his face disclosed a deeply spiritual and sensitive nature; Elfriede's perception of the beautiful composition was at one with his own, and Hardenegg could readily see with his jealous eye what pleasure these two took in singing together. It was with difficulty that he could bring an honest tone into his voice as he made his acknowledgments of their kindness. He leaned back in his chair with a scowl on his brow, when the father at the end of the first song insisted on having a second.

The Baron would have been in a still worse humor had he known the conversation which was going on relative to himself at the same time in a neighboring room.

When Ewald left them at the sound of the violin, he had gone into his sleeping-room, from which he had slipped out noiselessly, and going down the back stairs had left the house without any one being any the wiser. The street was dark and a murky cloud hid the moon from view, so that Ewald could not be seen from his father's windows above; yet he lingered close to the wall listening to the sounds from the beloved instrument.

"I dare not go up to him," he murmured, "for I have promised my father I would not. But if he should come down there, no one could blame me for that!"

After a little while he crossed the street, and opened

the door of the house. A moment later some one appeared on the landing above and called down in a hoarse, rough voice : " Ewald—is it you, down there ?"

" Yes, Herr Kostomarow ! I was afraid they would see me across the way. Can you come down for a moment ?"

There was a sound like a hoarse laugh, and a moment later a tall, stooping figure leaning on a cane appeared on the stairs, and came down limping.

" Are you so fearful, my boy, and so disobedient with it all ? Yet you cannot be otherwise if you are too weak to make an open fight of it."

He who spoke was an old man in regard to whose personal appearance Balthasar Stiller had used little exaggeration. Surely here, in the uncertain flicker of the street lamp, his large head had an unearthly and ghost-like aspect. He had snow-white hair and a long, thick beard of the same color, but the face, which was half-hidden by it, was sunken and colorless ; his sharp features gave an impression which might not have been unattractive in his younger days. The deeply furrowed forehead was strongly developed, and the deep sunken eyes glanced out from the heavy white brows with a keen and almost youthful fire. He was decently dressed, and his language was that of an educated man, and remarkably free from any Slavic accent.

He had reached out his bony hand to Ewald and the boy had seized it with impetuous fervor.

" How thankful I am that you came down to me, Herr Kostomarow ! You are always so kind to me !"

" That is folly ! What I do, I do to please myself. Later in life, boy, you will see that the greatest and noblest actions have the same foundation. What is all this I hear about you from the janitress ; that you have been attacked and are wounded ?"

“That does not signify. I got a little cut ; it pains a little, but is not dangerous. But did you hear the rest ?”

“What was that ?”

“Only about the courageous knight who drove the knaves away.”

“Yes, the woman did tell me something about an officer. What did he do that was so wonderful.”

The youth curled his lip contemptuously.

“Nothing—absolutely nothing. He was riding after us, in order to catch another glimpse of my sister Elfriede when the attack was made, and he was just in the nick of time to play the hero. If I had had his strength and a sabre at my side, I could have routed them without any assistance from him.”

“I don’t doubt it, Ewald. You have none of the coward about you ; I can vouch for that. But you say he was interested in your sister, how did he happen to know her ?”

He asked the question eagerly, as though he had a personal interest in the matter.

“Early in the day at the artists’ festival he forced himself upon us and was very polite to my father, all on Elfriede’s account, for it is easy enough to see that he will make sport of the rest of us so soon as his back is turned.”

“And your sister ? The noble officer has pleased her, doubtless ?”

“No ! I honestly believe that she detests him. But my father looks upon him as an extraordinary being. He’s in our rooms this very minute and has been there for the last two hours.”

“Who ? The officer ? He visiting your father ?”

“Yes, but not in his uniform. Doubtless he was ashamed to mount to our attic in it. Notwithstanding his condescension his arrogance shows in his eyes. You

should have seen his detestable pride, as he turned away from Herr Werner."

Again Kostomarow gave his disagreeable, significant laugh, but his face retained its usual expression.

"I understand well that type of man," he answered, grimly. "And before Heaven you are justified in hating such insolence and presumption. Whoever will become an honest man must learn with time to resist the yoke that tyrants are ever ready to place on his shoulders. And what is the name of this admirer of your sister?"

"He is a Baron von Hardenegg!"

The old man's shriveled hand fell heavily on his companion's shoulder.

"Hardenegg, do you say? That is not true!"

"That was the name Herr Brüning gave when he introduced him to us. Do you know him, Herr Kostomarow?"

Whatever this sudden ebullition had meant it was over in an instant, and the old musician answered, curtly:

"No! I do not know him; but it is not impossible that I may meet him some day. But don't bother yourself about it. You have been forbidden to visit me?"

"Yes! And I was obliged to promise. Ah, Herr Kostomarow, my father will never consent to my taking up the study of music."

"You'll do it sooner or later without his permission. One should listen to the voice of nature rather than to the short-sighted wisdom of men. And nature has certainly ordained that you should become an artist."

"If I only dared believe that! It is a happiness of which I can only venture to dream."

"The dream may become a reality to you. But such good fortune only comes after hard and constant work. Well, when you have decided you can count on me."

“Oh, I will work and study day and night ! But what can you do to help me ?”

“No use questioning until the time comes. Such gossip is as little use as castles in Spain.”

They entered as they ceased speaking the dimly lighted entrance to the Stiller house. And now they heard a door open and shut again in the third story, and a heavy step came slowly down the winding stairs.

“That is Herr von Hardenegg,” whispered Ewald. Kostomarow pushed the boy hastily away.

“Go out !” he ordered. “He shall not see you here.”

“I don't care whether he does or not,” replied the boy, defiantly ; but the old man's eyes glittered almost angrily.

“Go !” he repeated, peremptorily. “I wish you to.”

This time the boy ventured no remonstrance, but pressed his friend's hand silently and hastened out into the dark court and up the back stairs, the same way he had slipped down an hour before.

Kostomarow remained standing at the open hall door, so that he would be forced to make way for any one going out. Ewald was correct, it was Kurt von Hardenegg who came slowly down the stairs.

When the Baron caught sight of the old man he had little doubt that this was the musician about whom so much had been said by Herr Stiller. He brushed his arm in passing and the two men gazed steadily at one another for a second as though each was fascinated. Then the officer stepped past without a word of greeting and disappeared in the darkness.

A sharp, keen glance crossed Kostomarow's face, and the severe countenance seemed sterner than before.

The old man passed his hands over his eyes and brow, and grasped his walking-stick with a new energy.

“It is he—there can be no mistake!” he muttered. “Well, I think we will have a few words to say to one another yet, Baron von Hardenegg.”

Then slowly, unmindful of the first heavy drops of rain, he limped back across the street to his own dwelling.

CHAPTER III.

Hardenegg wrote his mother that he would be forced to delay his return home for several days, at least, owing to a matter of some importance, which required his attention. He thought the matter was settled, until he received a peremptory telegram from her which caused him to waver in his resolution. “I implore you to come, I demand your obedience in this. Everything here depends upon your presence.” The Baron was the more impressed, because he knew his mother was not a woman prone to feminine exaggerations. He had to admit to himself, on calm reflection, that he had no reasonable ground for staying where he was. He could not hide from himself the fact of his growing passion for the artist’s fair daughter; he realized fully that it would be far better to set off at once and free himself from the fetters of this foolish fancy.

Longer delay seemed really purposeless, and he acknowledged to himself that he had little ground for hope that he would ever win the girl’s favor. He had been at the painter’s the day before, but Stiller had

taken him to the atelier and had kept him there too, while Elfriede had persistently avoided him.

He had spoken with her for only a moment and then in the presence of her father and sister, and their short conversation had been on the most indifferent topics. "For which prize shall I strive?" he asked himself a dozen times. Better by far to order his servant to pack up at once and be off by the first train, but he lacked the energy to give the order. He would go back at least once more, and make one last effort to break through the icy reserve which enveloped the girl.

"I will be with you to-morrow without fail," he wrote on a sheet of paper; but as he stretched out his hand to ring for the servant to take the telegram, a sharp knock was heard at his chamber door.

"Here is some one who desires to speak to you, sir," announced the waiter. "His name is Kostomarow." The Baron looked up surprised. What could the old violinist possibly want with him?

"Ask him to come in," he said, not without some curiosity concerning the object of this visit.

The person who entered was the same uncanny-looking old man whom he had passed in the door-way a few evenings before. His clothes were none of the best, and his manners were not those of the circle in which Hardenegg was accustomed to move.

"Are you Herr von Hardenegg?" asked Kostomarow, shortly, as he stood leaning on his cane in the middle of the room. "I have sought you out, because I am in the position to make what will be perhaps an interesting communication to you."

The Baron pointed to a chair. "I am at your service, my dear sir, although I imagine that you rest under some misapprehension."

“That we can soon determine. Are you a descendant of Baron Kurt von Hardenegg of Buchwald?”

“I am, indeed. He was my grandfather and I was named for him, and the estate of Buchwald is my inheritance.”

He had an uncomfortable feeling when Kostomarow gave his peculiar harsh laugh without moving a muscle of his dark face.

“Your inheritance? Well, let us see whether you are quite accurate in your statement. Was your father the only son of Baron von Hardenegg?”

The old man's presence was already beginning to be disagreeable to the young officer, and the latter did not trouble himself to conceal his impatience.

“No! But before you continue your queries, will you kindly answer me one question? What has induced you to become so much interested in my family and our belongings?”

“You will hear soon enough,” answered Kostomarow, composedly. “Your father had a brother, an elder brother, if I am not mistaken?”

“Yes, he had. And does your interesting communication concern him?”

Kurt asked the question abruptly, and an expression of concern overspread his face.

The Russian seemed in no haste to answer; he looked keenly at the officer for several seconds before he spoke.

“To a certain extent, yes. I lived for many years in close companionship with a man calling himself Baron von Hardenegg, a son of Baron Kurt of Buchwald.”

His listener was not able to conceal his growing uneasiness. He drew a step nearer his forbidding-looking companion.

“If what you tell me is true, then indeed your communication may be of the greatest importance. When

did you first meet my uncle—under what circumstances—and what has become of him?”

“One at a time. But first I would like from you a confirmation of what I have heard from himself in order to settle the matter as to his being really what he claimed to be. Do you know why your uncle left his father’s house and his native land?”

It was evident that the Baron was disturbed by this direct question.

“I had not made any appearance in the world when all that happened,” he answered, evasively. “But I believe he had some difficulty with the superior officer in his regiment, and then a difference of opinion between himself and his father decided him to leave Buchwald.”

“Ahem! That coincides tolerably well with the story he told me. And you have never known what became of him?”

“No, so far as my knowledge goes nothing was ever heard of him after his departure. The family have thought him dead for years.”

“Dead. And is there no one who would rejoice if the dead should rise?”

Hardenegg frowned.

“I do not know, Herr Kostomarow, what warrant you have for such a question. At any rate, these family matters lie without the pale of our conversation.”

The old musician nodded acquiescently, although not a muscle of his face moved. “You are right. Why should you enter upon a question which I can myself answer?”

“And which without doubt does not concern us. And is my uncle still among the living?”

Kurt had endeavored to speak in an indifferent tone, but the hand which restlessly pulled his moustache

trembled and his whole manner betrayed an anxiety which he would fain have hidden.

Kostomarow shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot say. I saw him last about twelve years ago, when he lay severely wounded on a boundless snow-covered plain."

"That sounds very dramatic. I would be thankful, Herr Kostomarow, if you would relate to me succinctly and without circumlocution what you know, if you really do know anything, about my uncle and his fate."

"I come here for that purpose. A detailed account would weary you, and I have neither the inclination nor the breath to give it; and perhaps the incidents connected with your uncle's history would hardly be edifying to you. I suppose that it differs in some measure from the—undoubtedly very glorious—traditions of your house. I learned to know him in St. Petersburg, just when, I have long ago forgotten. He was then, as you are wont to say in Germany, in his best years; and I have reason to believe that Russia's capital city was not the first halt he had made in his wanderings, but where he had been before is of no interest to either of us, nor is it of any moment how he supported himself in St. Petersburg. Possibly he taught; it is possible also that he had some private resources; perhaps he starved. We lived under the same roof, and talked often over our opinions of matters and things. His were always exaggerated."

"That is very probable; how could it be otherwise when he, without just cause, became a wanderer on the face of the globe?"

Herr Kostomarow laughed again, if one could call that hoarse grunt a laugh.

"Quite right, how could he have been otherwise, as you say. But holy Russia was a more dangerous place

in which to exhibit eccentricities than was his own Fatherland. One fine day he disappeared."

"You lost sight of him?"

"Yes, for in the fortress of Peter and Paul, where he was imprisoned, it was no easy matter for an outsider to see him."

"In the fortress? Are you certain, sir, of the truth of what you say?"

"It does not please you? That I can readily understand. Have I not already said that this Baron von Hardenegg totally disregarded the traditions of his family? He was either in some conspiracy or he was accused of it; and the administration of justice in that blessed land of the Czar is such, that you might as well be one as the other. Two years later I had an opportunity of renewing our friendship."

"Probably they proved him innocent, and gave him his liberty?"

"From the prison—oh, yes! But the place where we again met was not much better. It was down deep in the earth, in the mines of Siberia, and we were prevented from shaking hands, because each of us wore two heavy chains."

Hardenegg was dumb from amazement and fright; all color had disappeared from his face. Herr Kostomarow seemed to derive great pleasure from these reminiscences.

"We could both say most heartily that it was a mercy that we were there at all. Many a man had been done for altogether upon weaker evidence than had been brought forward against us. But life in a silver mine cannot be said to be one of the pleasantest phases of existence. It was a dreary time for us, so that we longed for anything which would bring diversity into

our lives, and, with the help of an overseer who shared our sentiments, we effected our escape."

"All this sounds like a romance. I do not doubt your word, however, for what you have related does not lie beyond the range of possibilities; I shall need some time, though, to familiarize myself with this strange story."

"The only proof which I possess is in my honest face and this."

Here he stretched out his arm and pulled up his sleeve to show a deep, circular cut in his arm which the heavy iron chains had made. Hardenegg made a slight motion of horror, remembering Balthasar Stiller's description of this man, and his prophecy that his musical neighbor would turn out to be an escaped prison-bird. He moved a step back with an expression of disgust, and Kostomarow spoke again in his rough, harsh-sounding voice.

"In spite of the assistance which we had, it was no easy matter to escape after all, for the pursuers were upon us and had us by the throats when we least expected it. Two of them had to be laid in the grass before Hardenegg and Kostomarow could continue their journey."

"Do I understand you aright? You and my uncle killed your pursuers?"

"You have understood me correctly."

"Then he is really a murderer!" thought the officer. He felt he must bring the conversation with this terrible man to an end as quickly as possible.

"Go on! Did you succeed in escaping?"

"I did—certainly! Otherwise I would not be sitting here before you. What happened to our companion I am not able to say. We roamed about without any definite aim, half starved and half frozen. One day we discovered there were a couple of cursed soldiers who

were pursuing us, and had you been in my place you would have understood just how a poor hare feels when you noble folk are courageously hunting him to the death with hound and horn.

“The bullets whistled by our ears at close quarters. And although the fellows were devilish bad shots, they could hold out longer than we. My companion was shot down at my side, and a few hundred steps farther on the same fate overtook me. A bullet struck me in the hip, but fortunately I was able to drag myself into a hiding place, and my pursuers passed by without discovering me.”

“And your comrade, the—supposed Botho Hardenegg?”

“I have told you all I know.”

“So, then, according to your account, he is undoubtedly dead?”

“I did not hear his dying groan. The situation was not one in which I could concern myself about him.”

The Lieutenant began to pace the room restlessly. Nothing in the world had ever upset him so much as this day's developments, and he had a hard struggle within himself between doubt and hope.

Had he read the adventurous history of this unknown uncle he would have treated it as a fiction; or had any one else told him what he had just heard he might have doubted. But there was something convincing in this man's manner, and something corroborative in his speech and appearance, which made him have no doubts as to the truth of what he had just heard. And what interest could this stranger have in manufacturing such a ghastly tale, in which he himself certainly did not show to the best advantage. His bearing was assuredly not that of a man who looked forward to a reward.

But just here lay the doubt; what had brought him

there with this story, if not some selfish motive? Kurt von Hardenegg felt he was justified in that suspicion at least.

“You say that it is twelve years since you escaped—since you last saw Botho von Hardenegg?”

“About that; I cannot count the days and hours.”

“And in all these years you made no attempt to acquaint the family of your friend and fellow-sufferer with his story and probable fate! How does it happen that you come to me now with your confidence?”

“There is no reason why I should answer that question. Just assume that I have recounted all this to you because an accident had brought a Hardenegg into my neighborhood, just at the moment when I felt an inclination to talk over the old times.”

“And will you permit me to give you some substantial expression of my sense of indebtedness for the information you have imparted to me?”

“You mean you would like to pay me some money for it? Well, perhaps at some later day I may come for what is due me. To-day it is enough for me to know that my tale has given you pleasure.”

There was a tone of derision in his voice, but the old man's stony features neither confirmed nor denied what the tone implied.

Leaning heavily upon his cane he turned shortly and limped towards the door. The Baron followed him, but could not bring himself to extend his hand at parting. When he reached the threshold, the Russian turned around.

“A beautiful maiden, this Fräulein Elfriede, is she not?” he asked, abruptly.

Kurt stepped back a pace.

“I do not know, sir, of whom you speak,” he answered, proudly.

“Have you forgotten already? Well, so much the better, so much the better! There are no laurels for you in yonder garret; but you might make an enemy of some one there with whom it will be better for you to be at peace. Believe me, the warning I give you is well meant! Adieu.”

These parting words so dumbfounded the listener that he could not collect his senses in time to call the old man back and demand an explanation. Kostomarow was already far down the stairs before Hardenegg fully comprehended what had been said to him. After all, he scarcely regretted that he had let him go without replying to his threat. This old man's faculties were evidently not of the clearest, and it would not be wise, after all, to hold any conversation with him, or call him to account for a speech which was doubtless dictated by jealousy.

But if this man was half crazed, could one put belief in anything which he had said? The Baron vacillated between two opinions, but finally decided that he must believe him in the main. Kostomarow's history could not have been made altogether out of thin air, and even if but a small portion of it were true, Kurt felt that it was, after all, a certain guarantee of his uncle's death. And this consideration was of immense importance to Hardenegg. If he could only be certain that Botho von Hardenegg would never return to claim his rightful inheritance.

In truth, Kurt had never earnestly believed in the possibility of his uncle's return, but the confirmation which his opinion had to-day received gave him a gratifying sense of perfect security.

He turned to the table upon which lay the dispatch he had intended sending to his mother, and a happy thought struck him. What did he care for the Baron

Bassewitz and his daughter, if the reasons which induced his mother to desire an alliance with them were no longer of importance. What was there now to prevent him carrying on this delightful adventure with the painter's daughter, and of finally overcoming her proud reserve, by some well considered plan of attack?

Truly this Kostomarow with his mysterious history had come on the scene at the right moment; he had earned his thanks in a greater measure than he imagined.

Smiling, he destroyed the first telegram to his mother and wrote a second, which he dispatched at once by his servant.

“The fulfillment of your desire is impossible, the reason for your disquietude exists no longer. I have just received the confirmation of Botho von Hardenegg's death years ago. More when we meet.

“Your Son.”

To the imagination of the sanguine nobleman the revelations of this day had forever dispelled the gloomy apprehensions and voiceless fears, which, from time to time, like ghostly shadows had darkened the splendor of his brilliant career. All that was past now.

CHAPTER IV.

It was about noon when John Werner ascended the many steps which wound their way up to Balthasar Stiller's apartment. He did not usually mount them so slowly, and when he reached the upper floor he delayed knocking for some minutes.

"Can I speak with Herr Stiller?" he asked of the old servant who responded to his knock; but the answer was not encouraging.

"The master has shut himself in his atelier, and he gave me orders not to disturb him except for something of importance. I believe he is in haste to finish the picture which he has just sold."

Werner hesitated.

"It is not a matter of importance, at least to him. And the rest of the family, have they gone out?"

"Fräulein Elfriede is the only one at home. Won't you come in for a few moments, Herr Werner?"

He accepted the invitation, and followed the woman with an air of embarrassment which was not natural to him.

The servant had not thought it necessary to announce him, and his entrance was therefore a surprise to Elfriede.

"You, Herr Werner—and at this hour?" she exclaimed, as she laid down her stitching, while a new light came into her beautiful eyes, and the tell-tale color mounted into her cheeks, showing that his coming was not indifferent to her. But her friendly greeting did not dispel Werner's melancholy and perplexity, and he pressed his hand to his head several times like a man

who was suffering from some great physical or mental strain.

"I am very sorry to disturb you at this unseasonable hour," he began. "But as I shall doubtless be obliged to leave town early to-morrow, I could not forbear—"

There was a tremor of sadness in his voice, and a look of astonishment and anxiety came into Elfriede's face.

"What! Are you going away?" she asked, as he stopped speaking. "What has occurred to call you away so suddenly?"

"Nothing with which I need be dissatisfied. The old and enfeebled pastor of Frauensee needs an assistant who will in time become his successor, and the consistory have called me."

Elfriede could not prevent his seeing that her eyes were moist, but her voice had the ring of hearty sincerity as she congratulated him upon his good fortune.

"How rejoiced my father will be to hear of your good luck," she continued, "although it will be very hard for us to lose such a dear friend."

The young man let his head sink down and looked earnestly at her.

"The loss will be a great one to me," he said, softly. "The happiness which I have felt in my intercourse with you and your family I shall never find again. To me it seems that I am leaving all I prize behind me." She knew not what to say to comfort him, for his feelings found an echo in her own heart.

There was a long silence between them and then Werner continued, as if rousing himself from a dream: "As soon as I get to Frauensee the pastor will go off for a vacation. I shall be entirely alone in the parsonage, and I fear shall be very lonely in my new home."

Elfriede bent deeper over her sewing.

"Perhaps that won't be for long, Herr Werner. You

must have a hearth of your own, and take a wife who can kindle a fire in it for you."

Her words had a playful sound, but there was a trembling in her voice which the speaker could not control. Over the listener's face passed a glimmer of joyful hope.

"Oh, is this hope not too presumptuous, Fräulein Elfriede," his voice wavered—"that a true-hearted maiden may consent to share with me the simple, lonely life of a woodland village? I have very little to offer her. It may be years before I have a pastorate of my own, and even then I shall have but a limited income. The woman who links her fate with mine will have no glittering destiny."

"But she could be happy, notwithstanding. I believe that true love will ever be the same, no matter how modest the surroundings."

Never had her voice sounded so sweet in his ear, never before had such a rapturous feeling filled his breast. He did not glance shyly at her now, but his earnest eyes, which glowed with a mild, tender warmth, gazed steadily at her lovely face.

"Ah, Elfriede, it takes all the courage which I can muster to ask you if it would be possible for you to share with me that modest home."

He had come close to her and taken, without resistance, her hand, while he was speaking. But the little hand had suddenly become cold, and Werner felt it tremble as he held it within his own.

"Why do you not answer me?" he asked, anxiously, after waiting patiently for a short time. "Is it possible that I have misunderstood you?"

The battle which Elfriede had fought with her own heart was over. Without fear or embarrassment she looked in her friend's honest face.

"No," she said, "you have understood me aright. I am certain that the woman who will give herself into your

keeping will find great happiness. But not to me is it given to receive such a blessing."

"Not to you, Fräulein Elfriede?" His lips trembled, and a nameless terror was stamped upon his face.

"Do not be angry with me," she said, tenderly. "I will be as frank with you, as you have always been with me. My sphere of action lies between these four walls. Here I have found my life's task, and it is here that I must seek my happiness. I must never leave my father, and I must be my sister's protector until she finds a better and a stronger one."

"And therefore you reject my suit?"

Elfriede bowed her head affirmatively.

"I have taken a responsibility upon myself, and I must be steadfast for the sake of my family, and bring into their lives as much sunshine as is possible. You have been to this hour, my best, my only friend. You would not try to persuade me, John, to be untrue to myself? No, let us part to-day, as we have always met, cordial, warm friends. And if at any time I should need the support of your strong arm, I shall never hesitate to call upon you for assistance."

She held his hand in both her own and looked at him with affectionate earnestness. Neither her companion nor herself had perceived that some one had entered the adjoining room—the carpet had subdued the sound of the footsteps, and they had no warning of an approaching interruption until the door opened. Balthasar Stiller stood upon the threshold, and beside him was Kurt von Hardenegg. The unsuspecting painter saw nothing to excite suspicion in the start of surprise given by the sad lovers as he entered. He greeted his daughter's companion in his wonted hearty manner; the Lieutenant however, bit his lips and looked past Herr Werner with a glance of proud indifference, as though he was

unconscious of his presence. In that moment, the Baron's own eyes had given him the evidence of a rivalry, all thought of which he had hitherto dismissed with a smile.

It was clear now that he had been repulsed in all his efforts to win Elfriede's favor for the sake of this insignificant, haggard-faced preacher. He had never seen her looking half so beautiful as at this moment, when her countenance reflected the deep emotion which stirred her soul. A feeling of frantic jealousy, which, in a man of his hot-blooded temperament, soon becomes the wildest passion, seized him, and left in his brain room for no other emotion; his one thought was to banish this insufferable rival from Elfriede's side, not only for to-day but forever.

He excused himself upon some slight pretext from going to the atelier with the painter, and as he saw that the young clergyman had no intention of departing immediately, he did what he thought would, under the circumstances, be most apt to accomplish his object.

"I came here to carry you off for the rest of the day," he said, turning to his host. "I have so often enjoyed your hospitality that you will not, I am sure, refuse to accept mine for once. We will dine at my hotel, and afterwards the ladies—if they will be so good—will take a drive with us."

Balthasar Stiller stroked his long beard as was his habit when anything pleased him.

"Your proposal is not a bad one; what do you say, Elfriede?"

"It is assuredly a matter for you to decide, dear father. We shall be forced to decline the drive, for I am expecting a visit from a girl friend."

Hardenegg was prepared for this refusal, and yet he

felt himself aggrieved anew. But still, he had accomplished something, for it would be impossible for Werner to remain behind when Herr Stiller and he had left the house. Therefore, he only answered Elfriede with a bow, and then requested her father to get ready at once to accompany him.

In a short time the old man re-appeared in holiday garb and with glowing countenance.

“Why may not I begin to be frivolous even if I have gray hair,” he said, laughing. “How goes it with you, man of God; will you make the third at this little dinner? You look as though you needed a little recreation.”

Werner declined the invitation; but he knew it would be necessary for him to go when the others did, and he so longed for another word alone with Elfriede. He felt the warm pressure of her hand at parting, but he also knew that this silent mark of her affection gave him no more reason to hope than did the eloquent look from her beautiful, speaking eyes. This tender, wordless parting between the two was not lost upon the keen-eyed, distrustful Hardenegg, and he found it difficult to treat the clergyman with ordinary civility during the short time he was in his company.

As soon as he was left alone with the painter, he appeared to be in the best of humors. In spite of Stiller's avowed repugnance—the day of the festival—to dining in conspicuous places, he had no hesitation in accepting the officer's invitation, and his loud speech and pronounced manner aroused the suspicion that he wished to attract the attention of the rest of the guests to his fine company. He did speak to one or two, but Hardenegg was attentive and ordered choice wines, and it was not long before the liquor obtained the mastery over him. The dinner had just been served when a waiter

announced to Hardenegg that Herr Brüning was without, and desired to speak with him a moment.

Hardenegg felt annoyed. The sculptor had called twice at the hotel within the past few days without meeting him, and Kurt had an uncomfortable consciousness that he had hardly been polite to his friend. He excused himself to Stiller and went out. Brüning's earnest look gave little promise of an agreeable interview.

"I must not neglect to say farewell to you, Hardenegg, for I suppose the day of your departure is near at hand."

"That almost sounds as if you wished it were. I think I shall remain here for an indefinite period."

"I beg pardon, but this determination on your part surprises me."

"It will give those people who are always looking for the confirmation of strange rumors, an opportunity to re-echo all that has been said in the artists' quarter for the past few days."

The lieutenant had been drinking pretty freely, and the blood rushed to his head.

"I do not know why any one in the artists' quarter should busy himself about me," he said, sharply.

"Well, they only talk over what is public gossip. Or do you believe that it is an every day matter for a nobleman to give poor Stiller a fabulous sum for one of his impossible pictures?"

"How do they know it, and what do they say?"

"You little know your gray-haired protégé, if you imagine that he will modestly conceal from the world this triumph for which he has waited all his life in vain. I am convinced that he goes around the streets in order to inform every acquaintance he meets of the wonderful news. Yesterday I saw him in earnest speech with

the editor of the *Morning Post*, and I could wager that there's an article in the columns of his paper this morning concerning this newly arisen Maecenas and patron of the arts."

"How like a little town! Is it then so preposterous a thing in this little nest for a man to purchase a picture which pleases him?"

"Not at all. The only preposterous thing about it is, that you should be pleased with a picture of Stiller's. But the good people hereabouts, always industrious in such matters, have penetrated the mystery. With significant smiles they have reminded one another that the painter has a beautiful daughter."

"Well, what does that signify? Who ventures to suspect me of any wrong intentions?"

"To suspect? What an unpleasant word. There is not a man, woman, or child in the town that is not overjoyed at the good fortune which has come to the honest family."

The face of the Baron reddened to his very eyes.

"Brüning, is that mockery?" he demanded, looking at the sculptor with blazing eyes.

The other knocked the ashes quietly from his cigar as he answered:

"Not in the least. I speak in entire earnestness; why should I believe that my friend would be guilty of a base action?"

Hardenegg clenched his hand. But at that moment, he caught sight of his guest, standing with wine-flushed face in the door of the dining-hall, and withheld his passionate answer as a quick, defiant thought flashed through his brain.

"It is indeed wise to judge my actions cautiously," he answered, in a subdued voice, "for that saves one or

the other of us from being put to shame. Come back to-morrow, and we will finish our conversation."

With a cold bow of dismissal he turned back to meet Balthasar Stiller. Loud enough for Brüning to overhear, he said to his guest :

"We will smoke our cigars in my room, for we have some important matters to discuss with one another, my dear friend."

The sculptor shook his head as he looked after them ascending the marble staircase arm in arm.

That whole day was a festival for Herr Stiller, and in his simple, open-hearted manner he made no secret of it to his host.

He lay back on the soft cushions of the couch with the greatest satisfaction, and blew the cigar smoke from his mouth in graceful rings, while he watched with interest the skilful manner in which Hardenegg filled the champagne glasses.

"Truly, you rich people have no idea what enviable creatures the whims of fate have made you," he said. "I'll wager that a dinner such as we have just eaten and a bottle of this wine afterward, seem to you the most commonplace things in the world, and your thoughts scarcely take a higher flight than a care for the amusements of the next few hours. I don't intend to complain, but it seems a sad thing when one, like Moses of old, is shown the promised land in the distance, knowing that he must come down again from the mountain and be buried in the wilderness. This heavenly wine has given me back for a few hours my youth with all its enthusiasm. If I only had my brush and my canvass, I would surprise you by the inspiration of

my genius. But this flash of light with which the wine has fired my blood lasts no longer than the flicker of a straw fire. By the time I climb up to my poor attic it will all have vanished, and nothing will remain but the apathy and indisposition which follows after intoxication. The only memory which will abide with me will be of a past pleasure, and the surety that I would have been a renowned man if I had been born to the purple like yourself."

Hardenegg had, in the meantime, emptied his own glass twice, and now refilled it with trembling hand for the third time.

"And with your vigor and creative powers, do you really consider it too late to retrieve what at one time the goddess of fortune saw fit to refuse?"

"We may as well assume that it is too late; there's a certain kind of comfort in that, you know."

"No, my dear friend, you have not quite understood me. I should consider myself very fortunate, if I could assist in part, at least, toward the fulfilment of your very natural desires."

"Bah! You are poking fun at me. Do you think of dividing your fortune with me?"

The lieutenant had been drinking pretty heavily, and he now put his glass on the table with a clink and rising pushed his chair back.

"Yes—upon one condition."

The painter shook back his long gray hair and looked up at the tall aristocrat standing before him, unable to decide whether Hardenegg was joking, or in earnest.

"That must be a singular condition," he growled, without putting the cup which he had just taken from the table, to his lips. "Just for sport, tell me what it is."

"There is no jesting about it. I am in deep earnest.

If your daughter Elfriede will become my wife I will share all with her and her family."

Balthasar Stiller's glass had fallen to the floor, and he crushed his half smoked cigar in his left hand, apparently unmindful of the fact that it had burnt him. He rose from the couch with trembling knees.

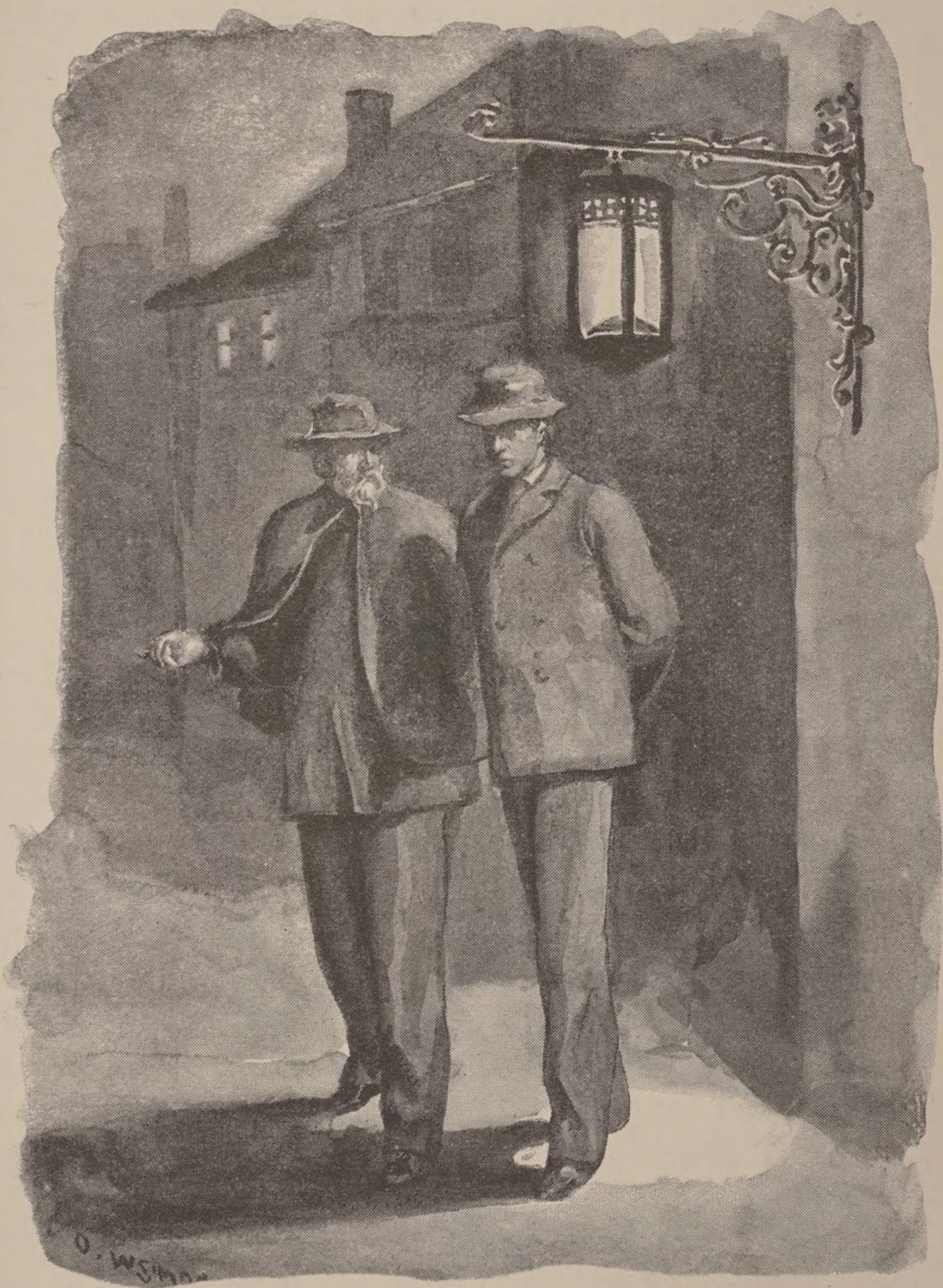
"I am an old man, Herr von Hardenegg, and I cannot at this moment decide how much I am under the influence of this devilish wine. It may be possible that I have chattered like a magpie, but is that a reason why you should scoff at me?"

"What shall I say to convince you of my seriousness? Perhaps I might have chosen a more fitting time and place for my proposal; but I felt assured that you were not the man to take offence at a mere want of due formality. I now formally ask for the hand of your daughter Elfriede, and I await your reply."

The painter's surprise and perplexity had been great, but now with astonishing rapidity he took in the situation. His knowledge and experience of life was little more than a child's, and after a few seconds reflection the impossible became to him the most natural thing in the world. What did it matter to him then that in the opinion of the world around him an impassable gulf lay between the Baron's social position and his own. Was it not enough that the amiable aristocrat had entirely overlooked it? With the emotion of a happy father he went to Hardenegg and threw his arms around him. There was no wavering now. His honest conviction was that he had now nothing to do but give his blessing.

"My son! My son!" he cried, with a real sob. "What a surprise! What a joy!"

Stiller's overwhelming tenderness affected Kurt rather unpleasantly, and embarrassed him as well. Not without trouble he led his embracer to the sofa, and placed



BALTHASAR STELLER MEETS JOHN WERNER.—*See Page 68.*

him gently upon it, and then sank into a chair opposite him.

“I thank you heartily, my dear Herr Stiller, for your fatherly wishes,” he said; “but I am not quite so certain of getting a friendly reception from Fräulein Elfriede?”

“Why should you doubt that? How could she hesitate to exchange her miserable present for a glittering future?”

Hardenegg smiled involuntarily. This childish old man, whom a promise of riches had quite intoxicated, was almost a sad spectacle.

“I assuredly do not think,” he said, quietly, “that your daughter’s decision in this matter will be influenced by any thought of change in her future mode of living. I can only hope to possess her, if I can win her love.”

“Certainly—certainly, what then? Why in the world should you not win her love? Have you not come into our house like the prince in the fairy tale?”

The Baron had intended to speak of Herr Werner, but he seemed unable to open his mouth on the subject of this hated rival. And, above all, he did not exactly know how the painter, in his present humor, would be affected. If there was really any love-making between Werner and Elfriede, it was at least evident that this simple-minded man had not the slightest premonition of it.

For some time longer, Herr Stiller reiterated his assurances of satisfaction and delight; then he took up his hat.

“What? Not going yet, are you?” asked Hardenegg.

“You must not think me ungracious, dear son,” said the old man, preparing to depart. “But every time I think of this extraordinary news, whether from joy or sadness I feel so confined within these four walls that I long for room. I must go out in the air and be alone

for an hour, for the wine and joy are having a perfect witches' dance in my brain."

"And the decision—the answer from your daughter, when shall I receive that?"

"You wish that Elfriede should hear of her good fortune through me?"

"Considering the shortness of our acquaintance that seems to me the best plan."

"Certainly, certainly; I should almost have choked had you requested me to remain silent. Come and dine with us to-morrow and get your answer. We will give you a hearty and fitting reception."

"May your confidence be justified, my honored friend. We will have fine days together at Castle Buchwald."

"What—do you mean me? Will you take me with you?"

"Of course, I never thought of separating such a charming family. In my home there is room enough for all."

"I—in a castle? It's enough to make one die of laughing."

And before Hardenegg was prepared for a new demonstration, Stiller had almost smothered him with another embrace. This stormy manifestation of affection on the part of his future father-in-law appeared to Hardenegg somewhat plebeian, and he made no further effort to detain him longer.

"Until to-morrow, dear son," were his farewell words as he went down the stairs. Hardenegg shut and locked the door after him and then went back to the window and flung it open. He had an oppressed feeling, and great beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. What he had this hour done was undoubtedly the most important and significant action of his whole life.

It was impossible to tell what would be the end of it

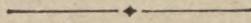
all. He was horror-struck when he considered the inevitable consequences of this offer ; neither reason nor calm deliberation had played any part in it ; there had been no room for reason. The wine he had drunk had incited him to it. He had made his mad leap with closed eyes, and how readily might that blind spring prove his ruin.

How everything seemed to have conspired against him just at this decisive time to rob him of his senses and benumb his judgment. Kostomarow's disclosures had assured him most unexpectedly of his freedom and independence ; the intimacy existing between Elfriede and Werner had fanned the spark of jealousy within his heart to a glowing flame, and lastly, the sarcastic calling to account from Brüning had forced him to take this position for his own justification. All these things working together had their influence on a man of Hardenegg's temperament and had driven him to take the rash step. For that his proposal to Elfriede was rash, he had become convinced before her father had left him. But he did not repent of it. His manly self-reliance fortified him against the fear of the future which came creeping over him.

After all, what had he to fear? He would have to battle against his proud mother's opposition. He knew beforehand that this battle would be both hot and fierce ; but whether for good or ill, she must resign herself to the inevitable. His greatest sacrifice would be that, upon his marriage with this poor maiden, he would have to withdraw from active service ; and that thought did distress him greatly. He was heart and soul a soldier, and he realized to-day that it would be no easy matter to exchange the gay, glittering military life for the monotonous existence of a country gentleman. But, after all, he consoled himself with the thought that the possession of

so beautiful and amiable a girl for life would repay him a hundredfold for his sacrifices of to-day. Even if his heart had been torn by the bitterest regret he would still not have thought of retracting his offer or seeking a way out of the difficulty by retreat. He had given his word, the word of a nobleman, and that ended the matter.

“Until to-morrow,” he repeated to himself. “The old man seemed confident enough, but I wish the next twenty-four hours were well over.”



CHAPTER V.

Herr Stiller walked the streets for a couple of hours with his hat on the back of his head and his coat carelessly unbuttoned, until he thought himself sufficiently composed to enter his home and announce to them the great, good news with becoming dignity and solemnity. It was dusk when he turned into the little street where his dwelling lay, but not too dark to recognize the tall, slender figure pacing up and down in the shadow of the houses opposite.

“Hello, Werner!” he called across to him; “are you moon-struck? Or have you a secret love affair, which brings you out promenading in front of the dear one’s windows?”

Werner started as if he had been caught perpetrating a crime.

“I have been getting a little fresh air,” he answered, embarrassed; “and then—then I also hoped I might meet you. It was impossible for me to say good-bye to you to-day at noon because of your visitor.”

Balthasar Stiller only heard him with half an ear.

"So? You are going away, are you?" he asked, indifferently. "Have you grown tired of us all in this old city?"

Werner sighed.

"No, it is not that. I have a call as assistant to the pastor at Frauensee, and I set off to-morrow."

"Well, I wish you good luck. It is not a very brilliant position, to be sure; but a young man, and single, too, can get through the world with little trouble. Perhaps you'll let us hear from you now and then. I wonder, my young friend, if you have any idea what has happened to me?"

"No, Herr Stiller, I have not, indeed."

"How could you know? It is no every day occurrence, after all. Properly speaking, I should say nothing at all about it; but you have always been a friend of ours, and especially Elfriede's friend—isn't that so?"

"I hold no one in the world in such high esteem as her, Herr Stiller."

The painter shook his hand cordially.

"That is very nice of you! It would be a sin to hide the joyful news from you. My Elfriede is betrothed."

"Betrothed!"

The painter was far too much excited to notice the perceptible change in Werner's voice as he uttered that one word.

"Yes, she is betrothed!" he repeated, with much energy. "But there is nothing strange of itself in that. That may happen any day. The main thing is the person to whom she is engaged. And now, pay attention, man of God! Elfriede's future husband is the First Lieutenant Baron Kurt von Hardenegg of Buchwald. That's a long-winded name, but not so bad."

"No, truly—not at all bad."

Werner repeated it mechanically and drearily ; he was hardly conscious he had spoken at all.

“But you have met the future bride-groom,” Stiller gossiped on. “A fine-looking man. I don’t believe there’s another in the whole city who will compare with him. And rich—enormously rich ! But you don’t say anything. Perhaps my chatter wearies you ; if so, accept my apologies.”

“Forgive me that I did not immediately express my hearty good wishes. And Fräulein Elfriede ? She is very happy, is she ?”

“Of course she is, although at this moment she knows nothing at all about it. When a father goes out in search of pleasure on his own account, he ought to bring the children something when he comes home, and I will draw this great surprise from my pocket as if it were a box of bonbons.”

He reached out his hands slowly ; but the young clergyman had suddenly become very red in the face, and summoning up all his courage said :

“If your daughter does not know it yet, Herr Stiller, is it not possible that she—that she may not accept Baron von Hardenegg ?”

The old man stared at him, wondering if he was out of his mind.

“Not accept him ? How in the world could you have conceived such a ridiculous idea ? Not accept him and become a rich and influential lady ? She will consider her old father and put an end to his galling struggle for existence, which has cost him the greater portion of his artistic ability. For you see we are all to share my son-in-law’s possessions, and my studio will henceforward be set up at Buchwald. Oh, there’ll be many changes in the future, my friend. The world will yet hear of Balthasar Stiller—it will hear of him ; bear that

in mind. Well, do you yet believe that my daughter will not accept him?"

The flush of hope had long since faded from the young man's pale cheeks.

"No, I think you are quite correct," he said, in a low tone; "I can but pray to Heaven that your daughter's future will be a happy one."

"Yes, that's a very sensible wish. But why cannot you go in with me now. It will be a great pleasure to you to witness Elfriede's happiness."

The young man turned hastily away.

"No, not now, Herr Stiller, not now. I will write to Fräulein Elfriede and congratulate her, if I do not find time to call at your house again before I leave town."

"As you choose. I must not delay any longer now. Good-night!"

He shook the clergyman warmly by the hand, and then turned in at his own door. As he mounted the steps quickly, he said to himself:

"I really believe that this pious young man is not quite free from envy. As a sincere friend he should have expressed himself a little more heartily over our good fortune."

The painter's displeasure would have been even greater had he seen the look of despairing sadness which overspread John Werner's face as he went wearily back to his own little room.

The two sisters were sitting in their family room when their father entered. Elfriede was occupied with some needlework, and Marguerite was reading aloud in her clear, toneful voice from a book. When Herr Stiller entered they rose to meet and embrace him. He, however, kept them back with his outstretched arm, and said, assuming a theatrical position and speaking in ceremonious tones:

“Fräulein Elfriede Stiller, I stand before you as a suitor for your hand in the name of Baron Kurt von Hardenegg, who lays his heart and his fortune humbly at your feet.”

The two girls gazed at him in silent astonishment. Their father had never before shown the slightest sign of intoxication on his return from a visit, and they did not know in the first moment how to take this surprising conduct. Elfriede, whose face had become very red, started to lead him to the sofa. He took her head between his hands and kissed her with unusual tenderness.

“My child, my beloved child,” he cried, struggling to keep back the tears. “I have always known that all our happiness would come through you !”

“Good heavens, father, is it really true?” asked Marguerite, who had stood motionless, divided between fright and astonishment. “You are joking with us, and I do not think it at all nice.”

“No, dear children, I am not joking, but am in sober earnest. We are to go to the castle of his ancestors ; Elfriede—our Elfriede will be enthroned as its mistress ?”

And without even throwing off his artist’s cloak he related to them, with many embellishments and exaggerations, all that had passed between the Baron and himself, on this eventful day. In glowing colors, over which his loving fancy lingered, he painted the gorgeous picture of their future, which to his child-like soul had already become a reality ; and Marguerite’s full heart rejoiced with her father as soon as she became fully convinced that his intoxication was of joy rather than of wine. They were both so overcome with delight that neither of them for the moment troubled themselves about Elfriede. The elder daughter had released

herself some time before from her father's embrace and had turned back to the table. Her face was quite colorless and her features had assumed a statue-like rigidity. She uttered no word, but gazed fixedly into the flame of the small lamp as if what they were saying was nought to her. When Balthasar Stiller remembered that it would be well to hear what the person most interested had to say, she was forced to speak.

"Well, my golden-haired home fairy," he cried, stepping to her side. "Is not all this worth a word of thanks, or a kiss for your foolish old father?"

When she turned to him slowly, and with a strong effort at self-command, tears were glistening in her eyes and her lips trembled.

"Do not call me your home fairy, father," she said, gently, "for I greatly fear that soon you will think me a bad and ungrateful daughter."

"An ungrateful daughter—you? What notion have you in your head now?"

He leaned with both hands upon the table, for her enigmatical words had frightened him so that his knees were trembling. Elfriede saw the sudden change in his face, and read the horror in his eyes, and her courage sank at the thought of dashing to pieces all his joyful illusions. Without speaking, she threw herself in his arms, sobbing violently, and the old man smoothed, with trembling hands, the head which lay against his breast.

"Elfriede, my dear Elfriede!" he murmured, tenderly. "How could you ever become a bad daughter to me?"

The unspoken anxiety was almost pitiful, and the fear of disappointment lent a tremor to his voice, for his fear was now as apparent as had been his childish joy a moment since. It would have seemed almost bar-

barous to have disturbed his dream of happiness ; and Elfriede, who loved her father devotedly, did not feel herself capable of administering so cruel a blow.

When she at last raised her tear-stained face from his shoulder she had regained mastery enough over herself to return his timid gaze with a smile, but the old man never could know what that smile cost her.

“I am agitated and surprised, dear father,” she said, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “You must not be impatient with me, because I have been a little foolish. Give me time to think it all over ; to-morrow—to-morrow we will talk of it. But now I need quiet and repose.”

The painter did not answer or force her to be more explicit. The reception of his supposed joyful news had been so contrary to what he had expected that his heart was vexed and sore within him. But he ventured no expression of opinion, though his soul was possessed with a nameless dread. He accompanied Elfriede to the door of the room which she shared with her sister, and embraced her lovingly. “Sleep well, my child,” he said, “and be certain nothing lies so near my heart as your happiness.”

His voice broke, and he went with uncertain steps to a chair as his daughter closed her door. Marguerite, who had been looking and listening with wide open eyes, went up to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“What is it, father ?” she asked. “Why is Elfriede so down-hearted ? Have you not brought us glad and happy tidings, at which we should rejoice ?”

The painter passed his hand over his eyes as if he would dissipate the gloomy thoughts which overpowered him.

“Yes, yes, that’s what I thought,” he answered, with a sigh. “But perhaps we are both mistaken, my child,

perhaps—but what's the use of talking about it. Light my lamp for me, and I will go to my room and paint a little."

Marguerite obeyed, but she knew from his voice that all pleasure in talking the good news over had vanished. With heavy steps he went to his sanctum and bolted the door after him, but he did not work. He stood looking for a while at his almost completed picture, thinking sadly of this day's events, when the words came clear and loud from his lips: "Yes, yes, I want nothing but her happiness! She shall not be miserable for my sake. But, my God, my God, why have you shown me all this splendor if it is to be nothing more than a vision!"

He threw himself down on the hard leather sofa to dream again and again through the long, silent night the vision of joy which had exalted his soul that day, and which now threatened to dissolve into thin air like the illusion of the poor hermit in his picture.

Marguerite, in spite of her excitement and impatience, remained for some time alone in the family room. But when her father did not return, her loneliness grew unbearable, and she went softly to her own apartment hoping not to arouse her sister. To her astonishment, Elfriede had not yet retired, but sat at the window, with her chin resting on her hand, looking fixedly at the starry heavens. Marguerite went to her softly and threw her arms around her, but Elfriede put her back, not unkindly.

"Elfriede, my own, dear Elfriede, what is it that makes you so sad? Won't you tell me and let me help you bear your sorrow?"

Marguerite had knelt on a stool by her sister's side, and Elfriede kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I thank you from my heart," she said, tenderly, "but

the care which oppresses me is not for your young soul, and I fear you would only understand me in part. Do not press me now; to-morrow," and she sighed deeply, "to-morrow I shall have overcome all this."

Marguerite laid her curly head on her sister's breast, and they clung to one another in silence.

Finally Elfriede said, with trembling voice: "Tell me, would you forgive me if I destroyed your happy anticipations? Would you be angry with me if I refused to marry the Baron von Hardenegg?"

Marguerite did not answer immediately. She had not learned to equivocate yet, and, above all, to her sister.

"Angry?" she said at last. "No, Elfriede, I should certainly never be angry with you, for I know you are wiser and better than any of us, and will always do what is right, but it would make me sad—very sad, on my father's account and a little on my own, too. What he says of our future, if you should marry this aristocratic officer, is certainly very grand. But what is it, Elfriede? Have I hurt you—I believe you are crying!"

The hot drops were falling on Marguerite's cheeks as she kneeled before her sister. She wiped them away and kissed Elfriede gently. The elder sister permitted her caresses for a time, but she was very weary and finally pushed the young girl from her with kind firmness.

"Now go to your rest," she said; "we shall both perhaps have regained our strength and cheerfulness by morning."

Soon all had become quiet in the little sleeping-room; only the pale stars peeping in through the curtains

could tell whether Elfriede's eyes had closed in peaceful slumber or not.

It was a dreary, melancholy day of rain in the old city. The little birds, whose nests were in the branches of the broad chestnut trees in front of the sisters' window, had sounded no morning greeting. They crouched submissively with wet plumage under the sparkling foliage, but their bright little eyes said, hopefully: "The sun is not dead; he will conquer in the end."

Elfriede had arisen early, had dressed noiselessly and had slipped softly from the room without disturbing her sister. The struggle within herself for the last few hours had left its mark upon her face. Since the night her mother died, no other had been so fraught with sorrow as the one just passed. Her cheeks were drawn and her eyes were dull and heavy. But her usual calm manner had returned to her. After a hard battle she had at length come to a definite conclusion, and she would not hesitate to put it into immediate execution.

All was quiet in the little home; it was too early for her to fear an interruption from her father or brother. So she sat down at the writing table and began a letter to John Werner. He it was from whom she expected deliverance from this painful dilemma into which her father's unexpected communication had cost.

The step upon which she had decided, she would, within the next twenty-four hours, see was unheard of and impossible. For the moment, however, she saw no other way out of her trouble but to appeal to Werner to save her. She had thought it all over from every point and

had finally determined that she was not strong enough to make this sacrifice which her father and sister expected from her. She would willingly and joyfully have renounced every hope of happiness for their sake, would have given her last drop of blood for their comfort and well-being; but she shrank from the terrible thought of giving herself to a man whom she could never love, and of living a lie her whole life long. She felt she was unequal to such a task, and she did not think she was to blame; but she also felt that her father, who would never be able to appreciate her reasons, would always regard her from his heart as an ungrateful and undutiful child. She knew him well enough to be sure that this supposed want of affection would make him more unhappy than the renunciation of his anticipated splendor, and from this sad possibility she hoped she would at least be able to protect him. She would go to him with the declaration that she could not become the wife of Baron von Hardenegg, for she loved John Werner and had already promised him, and she had no doubt that after the first painful awakening from this dream of future greatness which possessed his imagination, when he fully understood her reason for declining so brilliant an alliance, he would, sooner or later, view the thing in a different light and become fully reconciled.

And Werner? Of his deep and sincere love for her she had no doubt; and she returned that love with all the intensity of her nature; the bitterness of last night's struggle had made that plain to her. It was no hope of a speedy union which determined her now to confess to him her love; she did not solace herself with any such deceitful dream. Even though John had not told her that it would be years before a wife could light the fire on his hearth, she was resolved to remain

with her father as long as he needed her. Her hopes—that she knew—must ever lie in the distant future, and it might so happen that their marriage day would never come ; but for such renunciation she felt she would have strength enough, for the thought of it had long been familiar to her.

And so in this letter she laid her soul bare before this man. She suppressed nothing, but told him plainly why at this moment she was willing to accept his offer. As she wrote the color came back to her cheeks and her heart seemed to free itself from a heavy, grinding load.

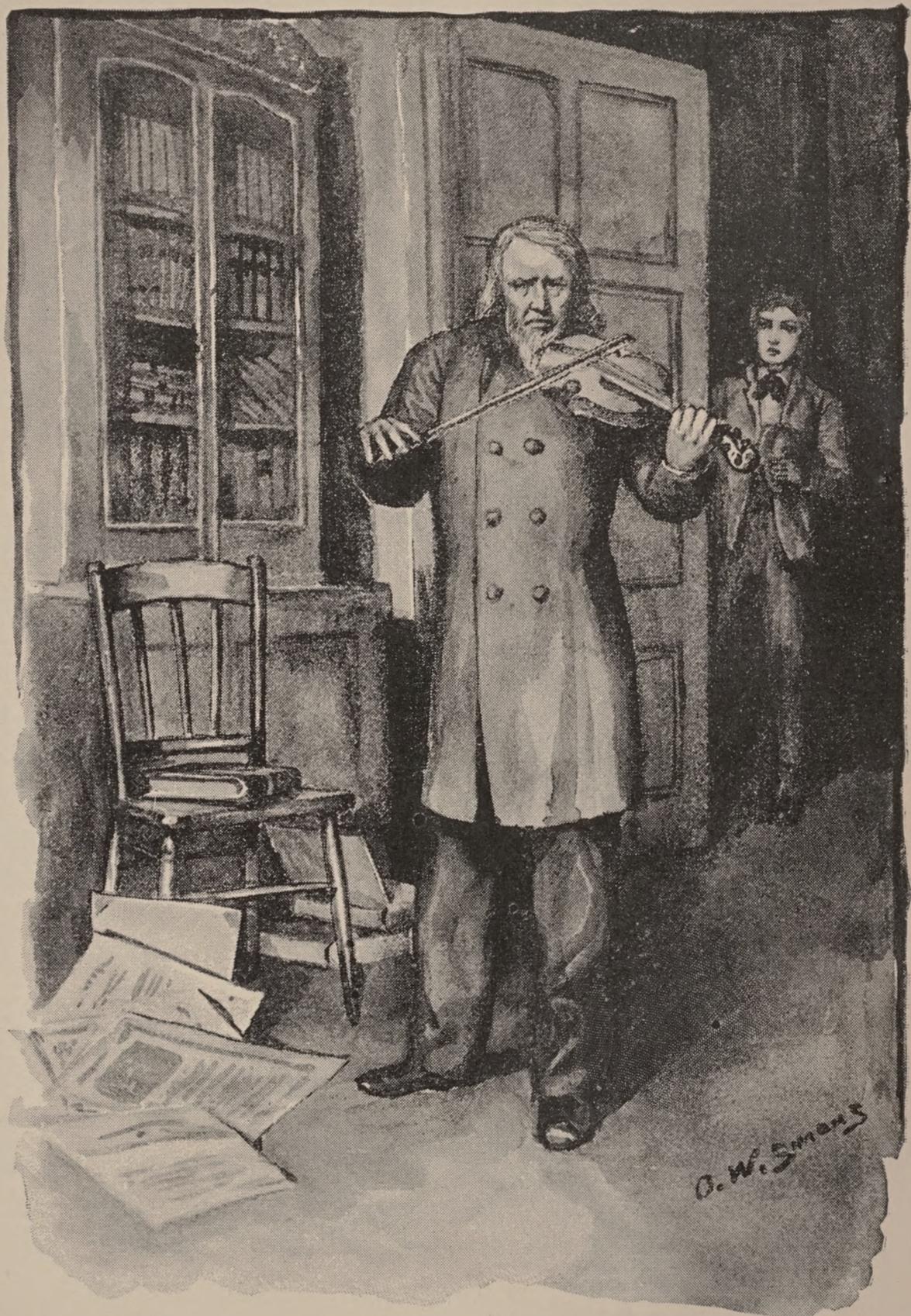
The letter was nearly finished when she heard a knock, and immediately after the old servant entered with a letter, which she handed to Elfriede saying it had just been left for her. The address was written in a bold, manly hand.

“From John,” said Elfriede, and her face brightened with joy, as she quickly tore the envelope and read :

“MY DEAR ELFRIEDE :

“Do not be angry with me, if I address you as I have, perhaps, no right to do. But you know how dear you are to me, and you have not taken from me the right to consider myself your friend. It is only as a friend, an earnest friend, that I speak to you at this time. Will you grant me a friendly hearing before our long separation, which will in all human probability be a parting for ever? All my foolish hopes, and the expression I gave to them in your presence, your good heart has already forgiven. And I will venture to say that until last night, notwithstanding your rejection of me, I should have had the courage to struggle on, believing that under other circumstances you might have been my own, true love. But now the support of my self-love is broken. After an hour of

deep reflection, I have come to a right understanding of the noble reasons which have actuated your course, and the sacred duty which I have to fulfill has grown clearer to me. Your love for your father is for you a higher law than the hope of earthly joy, and I should indeed be an unworthy laborer in my master's field, if I was not fully and deeply convinced that your clear perceptions have guided you aright. For your unselfish fulfillment of every duty you will at some future day receive your great reward, even if the happiness of love such as exists between man and wife is denied you. No man could hope to win either your affection or your esteem, who sought to make you waver or urged you to turn from your path. That this path will be both steep and thorny for a long time, you well know. But you are strong and courageous and will conquer your temptations. My prayers and my blessings shall go with you to the end. Your father told me last evening of the great change which would come into his life if you accepted a rich and aristocratic suitor. He was not certain of your consent, but the thought that you would not give it was with him beyond the range of possibilities. And now, as I view your yesterday's answer to me in its right light, I have no doubt but that you will consent. Upon a foundation of esteem and thankfulness you will help your husband to erect the structure of contentment and happiness for which he longs. And if a friend's blessing will assist you in this effort, receive mine in all kindness. I could have found time to say this face to face, but we poor, human creatures are, in spite of our good resolutions, oftentimes weaker than we, or our friends, or the world in general suppose. Therefore, I must rest satisfied with this written farewell, for in this way it is certain that no hateful dissonance, no echo of vanquished folly, will disturb our parting. If at any future



HERR KOSTOMAROW PLAYING HIS VIOLIN.—See Page 84.

time we meet, by God's decree, we can look one another in the eye with clear consciences. I send you a hearty greeting and a warm farewell to all. Think kindly in your quiet hours of

“JOHN WERNER.”

Slowly Elfriede folded the pages of the letter. Her face had again assumed that rigidity of expression which had been so noticeable the evening before, as if the unexpected had again overtaken her. Her fate and her future were decided. There was now no uncertainty as to her future course. She struck a light and burned the letter which she had just written until only its ashes were left. Werner's letter she hid in her bosom.

The faint odor from the burnt paper had hardly blown from the room when the studio door opened and Balthasar Stiller stood upon the threshold. He looked like a man who had taken little rest on his hard couch, and had awakened frequently from sad and distressing dreams. When Elfriede caught sight of his figure, still clad in the garments he had worn last evening, his hair in confusion, and his pale, distressed face looking out from under his disordered locks, she was almost angry with herself for having added an iota to his troubles, and she hastened to him with loving embrace and greeting.

“Good-morning, father. I do believe you didn't go to bed last night, and perhaps it was on my account. I acted so badly and you are angry with me, are you not?”

The old painter smiled and stroked his gray beard.

“You can appease my wrath very easily, my child; and how willingly would I forget this detestable night, if—”

“If I should tell you that I have been foolish and that

I will thankfully accept your decision for my future? Is that it, my dear father?"

"Well, yes, you weather-vane, what else could it be? But are you really in earnest?"

She laid her pale face on his shoulder, so that he could not look her in the eye, and whispered, indistinctly: "Yes, father, I am in earnest."

There was much rejoicing from the old man now, but his boisterous hilarity was not shared by the others. Marguerite had not felt comfortable over her sister's decision, remembering their conversation of the past night; but she lacked courage as she glanced at Elfriede's pale face to seek again for her confidence. Ewald, who yet carried his wounded arm in a sling, sat silent at the breakfast table and learned the news for the first time from his father's garrulous talk. He pressed his lips together and his dark eyes looked reprovingly and questioningly at Elfriede. About nine o'clock he took up his books to go as usual to the gymnasium, but he lingered a moment in the hall until his sister, as he had expected, joined him, when he asked her in a hasty whisper, "Is it true, Elfriede? Have you really decided to marry this—this officer?"

"You have said it, Ewald! It is my father's wish and will be best for us all."

"But you do not love him—you could never care for him. He is arrogant and bad. Even if he is friendly and agreeable now, yet at bottom he looks down upon us with contempt."

"How can you come to such a conclusion? You are too young to judge of such serious things."

"And this is your fixed determination?"

"Certainly, and it will be well for you to become reconciled as soon as possible to the inevitable."

"I? Never—never! Before I'll sit at the same table

with that officer of dragoons with his air of condescension as if he knew he was our benefactor, I'll leave home and make my own way in the world."

The approach of their father prevented Elfriede's answering the boy. Ewald hurried off, but he did not go in the direction which led toward his school. Indifferent as to his promise and careless as to whether he was seen or not from his father's windows, he crossed the street and disappeared within the doorway leading to Kostomarow's quarters. His heart was beating violently and his cheeks were feverishly red, as he stood before the Russian's door. The well-known strains from the violin came out to greet him, and he stood quiet for a little while, in order not to disturb the player. But Kostomarow's phantasies had no end, so that at last Ewald, after knocking repeatedly, cautiously opened the door.

Had not his passion for music long since overcome all feelings of timidity respecting the old man's personality, his appearance at this moment would have inspired the boy with terror. Kostomarow's surroundings were just as fantastic and unearthly as was his appearance. One might have thought himself in a library, had not the poor, iron bedstead and the washstand in the corner made it clear that the four bare walls of the room were the boundaries of the old man's world; no carpet covered the floor, there was no easy chair, no mirror, no picture or other ornament to please the eye of the inmate, nothing but the high book-shelves filled to overflowing with books, while the floor and the few chairs were covered with a confusion of papers and notes, the curtains were drawn closely before the windows and the light which forced itself in this rainy morning was dim, gray and cold. And the sovereign of this queer little world in his long, dark, Turkish robe, with his disordered hair

and long gray beard looked exactly like a magician at whose bidding devils appear and men are turned to stone. Although he had turned his head a little when Ewald entered, he continued playing for some time as though he took delight in the youth's wrapt attention.

It was indeed a rare pleasure to listen to him. In the whole city and far beyond its walls, there was no master like him, and no instrument which could be compared with his. Ewald knew that the little unassuming violin was a genuine Stradivarius, and he looked upon it with admiring reverence. Even Kostomarow handled his treasure with a care which was not in keeping with his usual negligence regarding his possessions. When he had ended his playing, he wiped it carefully with a silk cloth and then laid it in a costly, richly inlaid case. Then he greeted his visitor, who still stood by the door, rather roughly.

"What brings you here? Didn't you promise to avoid my domicile?"

"Yes, Herr Kostomarow! But I cannot keep that promise. Something extraordinary has happened to us."

"Something extraordinary—indeed! Has your father had a fit? Or has your sister Elfriede eloped?"

"No? But she is betrothed."

"And you call that something extraordinary, you idiot? That appears to me the most natural thing in the world. And who is the lucky man? The lank preacher by whom you set such store?"

"Oh, if it were he, I would certainly make no moan. But she has otherwise decided; she is to become the wife of Baron von Hardenegg."

Kostomarow looked astonished.

"Is it possible! He has made her an offer of marriage?"

"Yes, and he will be so condescending as to take us all to his castle; I believe he calls it Buchwald."

“Truly, that’s the best of all! And why the devil have you such a troubled face?”

Ewald looked hurt and showed it. For the first time he was out of humor with his patron.

“It’s no laughing matter to me, Herr Kostomarow. I cannot accept benefits from a man whom I hate from the bottom of my heart. I will not be dependent on him—no, I will beg first.”

His listener did not answer immediately. He began pacing the room, and kicking aside all books or papers which lay in his way. Two or three times he muttered half aloud some unintelligible words, then he turned suddenly upon Ewald and gave him a piercing glance, as though he would look into his very soul.”

“Has your sister accepted him of her own free will, or has she been forced into it?”

“Who is there to force her? Not my father, for she is the apple of his eye, and he would do nothing to bring her misery.”

“Very well, she has brought her fate upon herself. I will not prevent him marrying her—no, I will not!”

“What could you possibly do, Herr Kostomarow?”

“Do not question about that which does not concern you. What have you decided to do?”

“I do not know. But on the day when this marriage takes place, I shall start out for myself.”

“Good, good; you are right. Your honor must be free from any tarnish. You must not owe it to stolen money. But if you have the courage to fly on the wedding-day, why not go earlier—why not to-day?”

“Herr Kostomarow, if I rightly understand you—”

“Yes, you understand me well enough. I have a journey to take which I must begin to-day. Where it will end I do not know, and I doubt if I shall ever return

here. I am ready to take you with me, and to provide for your musical education, as well as your temporal needs until you can take care of yourself."

"Oh, Herr Kostomarow, how thankful—"

"Wait! Spare your protestations until you have heard me out. I do not do this from any insipid feeling of good nature, but because I think I can make out of you an artist, a great artist. The stake is, for one in my circumstances, not inconsiderable, and I will not be tricked out of my profits. I state my terms and their purport in few words: Absolute obedience, perfect honesty and untiring industry! Moreover, you are to reimburse me for every penny I spend upon you, as soon as you are in circumstances to do so. This is all I have to say on the subject. Do not answer me now. A hasty answer is worse than none. This is a question for you of more importance than a pleasure trip or a little adventure. Now go home or go to school, and come to me at my dinner hour, three o'clock, with your decision. Go! I won't hear a word now!"

He dismissed him with a motion and limped over to one of the book cases. Ewald did not dare to speak, although he knew his answer at three o'clock would be the same as if given at that moment.

"I will come, Herr Kostomarow," was all he said. Then he left the house and went down the street as one in a dream.

That afternoon there was a heavy step on the old, creaking stairs leading to Herr Stiller's apartment, and a sound of jangling spurs and of a clanking sabre. Kurt von Hardenegg came to-day for the first time in his uniform, and as Balthasar Stiller opened the door to meet him, his heart filled with pride and admiration at the sight of this handsome, aristocratic man, with whom he was soon to be so closely connected.

“We have been waiting for you, dear son,” he said, “but that does not matter. You have come, and that is the main thing.”

“And I hope I am not unwelcome, Herr Stiller?”

The painter laughed, but in an embarrassed manner.

“How could that be possible? But be good enough to enter. I will call Elfriede immediately.”

He found his daughter sitting at her window lost in thought, but as he noted the expression of pain in her eyes, he became again possessed of a deadly fear. Half aloud he spoke her name, and a heavy burden lifted itself from his heart, as she turned to him with a friendly smile, and did not hesitate, when he told her of the Baron's arrival, to prepare to follow him.

“You can call me, child, when you want my company.” With this rather forced expression, which he strove to make jocular, the father turned back. He was not quite comfortable about this first love meeting, which he could scarcely believe would be altogether a success, and with an anxious feeling he left them alone.

There was nothing sentimental nor tragic in this lover's meeting. Hardenegg stepped forward to meet Elfriede when she entered, and said, with the versatility of a man of the world, whom nothing embarrasses: “After the reception which your father has just given me, may I hope that he has communicated to you our conversation of yesterday, and that you will not refuse me my heart's desire? With your permission, I will repeat what—”

Elfriede made a slight movement which commanded him to pause.

“There is no necessity, Herr von Hardenegg. I am convinced of the sincerity of your friendly disposition towards myself, and thank you from my heart for the honor which you have done me. But I scarcely know

whether I am right or not in accepting it. The difference between our worldly stations is very great, and—”

This time it was Kurt who interrupted her.

“Surely this imaginary difference need not be considered, where love exists between two hearts. Rest assured, my dear Elfriede, that as my wife, you will be protected from all that which, even in your thoughts, could ever annoy you.”

“And you yourself, Herr von Hardenegg? Our acquaintance is a very short one. Are you sure that you will not sooner or later consider this step a rash one, and that you will not live to rue what you now do?”

“You evidently have very little confidence in me, if you can look forward to such a possibility. No, as warm and true as is my love for you in this hour, so will it ever remain strong and unalterable. Even the thought that at any time my happiness in possessing you will be turned to regret is almost insulting. Why should we disturb the happiness of the present moment by such doubts and apprehensions? Let me have an assurance of my good fortune from your own lips; give me but one precious word that you will be mine, and drown all depressing thoughts in the ocean of our love.”

His eloquence had to Elfriede's fine perceptions a declamatory sound, and she was repelled by it. But she had entered the room with a fixed determination and she was strong enough to adhere to it faithfully. As Hardenegg came near her and whispered, tenderly: “A single word, beloved one, just one word for my ear alone!” she could only give him the one word, “Yes.” Even as she spoke that word her voice trembled and she felt her heart flutter strangely. With closed eyes she submitted to his embrace as he pressed an impassioned kiss on her pale lips.

Then she released herself from him and said: “We will

call my father, there is no longer any reason why he should not be with us."

She took it for granted that he would wish it and opened the door. Balthasar Stiller glanced quickly from one to the other, and when he noticed no grounds for his apprehensions his cheerful humor returned to him.

Hardenegg was bright and conversational, and demeaned himself as a fortunate suitor should do. He checked the painter's demonstrative familiarity with a tact which was not entirely the result of his aristocratic rearing. While apparently assuming a confidential tone with the old man, he was at the same time erecting an invisible barrier between them of whose existence Elfriede was soon as well aware as he himself. Marguerite was too young and too full of life to be for long depressed over the past evening's events. Hardenegg's graphic description of the castle of Buchwald and its romantic surroundings threw her into ecstasies, and it was not long before she assumed a bantering tone toward her future brother which seemed to please him as well as the merry girl, and augured well for their friendly relations in the future.

Ewald's long absence had scarcely been noticed. But now Elfriede glanced frequently and with growing uneasiness toward the door. Already the evening was drawing on, and remembering their last words in the morning, she felt that, under the circumstances, she had cause for deep anxiety.

At last she went to his room, hoping he might be there, but she shrank back alarmed when she saw the confusion in which it lay. His books, linen and various garments were thrown about in disorder as if he had made a hasty selection of those he most needed, and Elfriede saw in an instant that the various trifles which

he most highly prized had been taken from their wonted places. When she approached his little table she saw a letter lying on it addressed to his father. Now she knew that she had not been alarmed without reason, and that this hasty boy had carried out his foolish notion. But not a moment was to be lost, and no consideration for their guest's presence must keep her silent regarding her brother's fate. She called her father to her and told him in a few words her fears and then handed him the letter. A flush of anger overspread his face even to his temples as he read in a loud voice the contents of the short letter :

“DEAR FATHER AND DEAR SISTERS :

“I cannot endure the thought of living on the charity of a strange, arrogant man, and so I shall not remain with you any longer for I should be forced to tolerate Baron von Hardenegg, whom I hate. I am going away with Herr Kostomarow, and by the time this reaches you I shall have already left the city. He will make a musician of me, and so fulfill my dearest wish. Under his protection I shall be well cared for, for he is not, as you think, a bad man, but disinterested and noble.

“If it be possible, dear father, forgive me for what I have this day done. I know I am not doing right, but God knows, I cannot do otherwise. Perhaps you will recognize later on, that with my aversion for this officer, no other course was open to me, and you will then grant me forgiveness.

“Your true and loving son,

“EWALD.”

“Has the boy gone mad?” railed the painter, and before Elfriede could prevent him he had rushed back

into the other room. "Have I not often said that that cursed, limping devil across there would some day entice him on to destruction?" cried he, in a fury. "Now the business is done, and I have one child the less."

Hardenegg looked up quickly.

"Your son has not gone off with this Kostomarow?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Yes, that's just what he has done! May the devil take his wretched seducer!"

The officer had already risen.

"Since when have you missed your son?"

"He must have been in his room a few hours ago to write this senseless letter."

"Good! In any case he can't have gotten very far yet. I beg you to excuse me and I promise you I'll have your son with you again in a few hours."

Balthasar Stiller stepped in his way with something more than his usual decision.

"Hold, my dear Hardenegg—not a step, I must beg. That undutiful youth shall cross my threshold no more. I will tear him from my heart as I tear this miserable letter!"

He flung the bits of paper on the ground and trampled them with his feet. He must have been struck to the very heart to have so entirely lost his usual good-nature. Elfriede laid her hand appeasingly on his shoulder and Hardenegg spoke impressively to him.

"You are on the point of committing an error, Herr Stiller," he said, earnestly. "No matter how much you may desire to punish your son's youthful follies, he must at least be rescued from the dangers of such companionship as Kostomarow. It is absolutely necessary to bring him back."

But Balthasar shook his lion's mane with uncompromising doggedness.

"No, no, ever and always no! Do not waste your time trying to persuade me, for it would be in vain. He has betrayed all my care and all my devotion for the sake of this wild, strange fool; now let him look to it, how he comes on with this same fool."

"But this Russian is something worse than a fool, he is a criminal."

The painter started involuntarily, and his brow became darker.

"How do you know that? Have you ever made his acquaintance?"

Hardenegg hesitated. He had some thought of inventing a tale regarding Kostomarow's visit to the hotel, but he concluded it would be better to avoid the many questions which such a statement would bring forth.

"No," he said, "I have only heard some reports which were circulated in regard to his past, and you yourself, my dear sir, have inferred something of the same sort, from the man's repulsive appearance."

"Well, it's all of a piece. Perhaps he'll make a criminal out of my Ewald when he gets ready. Perhaps my discipline was too strict for the wayward boy, and now he may be his own master. I have no interest in him further, and no share in his future, whatever it may be. It will be the same as though I had never had a son."

And he remained dumb to all appeals and prayers. And when Hardenegg, notwithstanding, said he would have the boy brought back on his own responsibility, he was almost told in plain words that he was not expected to mix in their home affairs.

"You would not help him by bringing him home,"

Stiller said, "for there is no longer any place for him here, and I don't know, under the circumstances, what would become of him. No man in the world, my dear son, has less reason for conferring any benefit on the boy. He deserves nothing at your hands."

Only Elfriede's pleading glances prevented him from revealing more ; but nothing they could say altered his fixed resolution. A dark, portentous cloud hung over the little circle ; the conversation, which had before been bright and cheerful, now dragged wearily, and even the evening meal, for which Balthasar Stiller had made extra preparations on account of their guest, was forgotten and left untasted.

Hardenegg left them earlier than he would otherwise have done, for he saw it would be useless to hope to see Elfriede alone on that night. His heart was filled with conflicting emotions as he left the old house ; but these emotions were ultimately forgotten in the one thought : "No matter how uncomfortable the old man may be, the extraordinary beauty of the daughter outweighs all his mistakes and follies, and this beauty belongs to me, and no one shall enjoy it but me."

Truly, the prospect of such happiness was worth even greater sacrifices !

CHAPTER VI.

The day on which Kostomarow and his protégé started they traveled only about eleven miles. During the short railway journey the taciturn old man had said nothing regarding their destination, and Ewald was not in the humor to question or talk. But he was astonished when Kostomarow got out at a little, insignificant station even the name of which Ewald had never heard. They took up their quarters at the little inn whose accommodations were such as might be expected in a dull, country town. As they entered the room which had been assigned to them, Kostomarow said: "We shall probably remain here for several days, and as I have various matters about which to inquire, I will not, of course, be able to take you with me every where, and you must amuse yourself for the time being, as best you can."

He ordered a simple evening meal to be brought to them, and made some inquiries in his usual manner from the maid who waited upon them. He asked the whereabouts of many persons who he supposed lived in the village or in the neighborhood. Of many for whom he inquired, the servant had never heard; several names were known to her by hearsay, but those who had borne them had long since died. After a time Kostomarow dismissed her impatiently, and she needed no second bidding, for she evidently regarded the white-haired old man as a kind of spectre. After the short meal was ended, the Russian limped to the window, and pointed to a rambling building of stone, which stood on rising ground

not far distant, and whose outlines were definitely marked in the gathering twilight.

“That building, which you see yonder, is an old Cistercian Monastery,” he said. “It is falling into decay; for over a hundred years a small portion of it has been used as a poor-house. But I’d advise you to wander over it to-morrow. The chapel is well worth visiting with its inscriptions and Latin epitaphs; you will not find many in existence like it, and will feel well repaid for spending your day there. I shall expect you to give me a detailed account of it all to-morrow evening.”

“You seem to know this old town pretty well, Herr Kostomarow. Perhaps you lived here at some former time?”

“No! And you had better understand, once for all, that I do not care to have any questions asked regarding myself or my past life. What is well for you to know I will tell you sooner or later, and now it’s time for us to go to bed.”

Ewald mounted the old Abbey stairs the next day, and was deeply impressed with the noble simplicity of the old stone buildings, which would at one time have wearied him to death, but now, in his present humor, had an elevating and inspiring effect. Here he found comfort and consolation for all the doubts and torturing sensations which had, naturally enough, disturbed him on the first day of his flight from his father’s house; and Kostomarow seemed well satisfied with him, when he, in the evening, told of all that had attracted his attention during the day.

“You have now had time and opportunity to consider your yesterday’s decision,” he said, watching the boy sharply. “If you regret it, it is yet possible for you to return. Tell me frankly and honestly what is your determination.”

Ewald met the old man's glance unhesitatingly.

"I will remain with you, Herr Kostomarow," he replied, and the old Russian nodded his head and the matter was settled.

The following morning was again bright and sunny, and Ewald would have been well pleased to spend it as he had spent yesterday, in the old Cistercian Cloister, but Kostomarow had other plans, and other surprises in store. Before the door stood a light carriage and horses, and he told his protégé to prepare for a ride. "As we drive across the country," he said, "keep your eyes open; but don't talk much. I am not in a gossiping mood to-day."

And now they went at a quick pace across the market space and out of the village. The country round about was a very beautiful one, dotted here and there with fruitful orchards, and Ewald was so delighted with the charming prospect that he felt it no hardship to refrain from conversation, as he had been bidden. Indeed, he had never known the old musician to be as silent as he was to-day. He sat with his powerful figure all sunk together, and with his withered hands clasped tightly over his crutches; they trembled often as though a shudder convulsed his whole body. Then he would cast his deep, flashing eyes over the ever-changing landscape, and mutter now and then broken vehement words, which Ewald did not understand, and whose meaning he dared not venture to ask.

The longer their ride the greater became Kostomarow's inward excitement. As they passed a sudden, sharp turn in the road he straightened himself and sitting erect called to the coachman in a hoarse voice to halt. The road here became steep and from their position they could command a fine view of the surrounding country. At their feet lay a valley whose picturesque

loveliness drew from Ewald an involuntary cry of joyous admiration.

Fields of waving grain and fresh, green meadows covered the sloping land, while back of them the thick forest with its depth of green foliage stretched as far as the eye could reach. Just at the edge of the woods were scattered the steep, red-roofed houses of a village with a high church tower rising in their midst. On a height to their right arose a stately, gothic pile, whose towers and battlements and many windows glistened in the sunlight. It looked in the midst of this luxurious region a princely palace indeed.

Ewald would have asked a question or two now, but he stopped short as his eye fell on Kostomarow. Something singular must have occurred, to judge from the old man's bearing. He spread out his arms as though something unseen was pressing against his breast; then he distorted his features into a wild grimace, and as he glanced in the direction of the castle he shook his clenched fist and gave vent to many guttural mutterings which had the sound of inward laughter but were altogether uncanny, and gave an impression of uncontrollable anger. The coachman shook his head meanwhile with an anxious expression; he was convinced that he was driving a mad-man, and no one could have blamed him for the suspicion.

After a short lapse of time Kostomarow seemed to be his old self again. As quickly as his lame leg would permit he clambered down from the carriage, and motioned to Ewald to follow his example.

"If you drive for fifteen minutes you will come to an old inn," he said to the coachman, "and you can wait for us there. I don't think we shall be away over two or three hours."

As the carriage rolled away he turned toward Ewald.

“Neither do I want your company, my boy. So you can roam around at your pleasure—if you are at the inn three hours from now it will be time enough; you can’t miss it, for it lies straight ahead and has the sign of a red-brown lion hanging out on a shield.”

He reached out his hand to him, and then struck off in a path that led down the valley. He had scarcely gone a dozen steps, however, when he turned around to Ewald. “No matter which way you go, do not go near that castle which lies yonder. I forbid it expressly—do you hear?”

Ewald’s respect for Kostomarow was too sincere, and his reliance in him too great for him to be astonished at his eccentricities or unwilling to obey any injunction of his. The order which he had just received, but did not comprehend, he obeyed without a murmur. As the limping figure of the old man disappeared, he took a narrow path across the meadows in the direction of the red roofs of the village. The gentle breeze was cool and invigorating, and he took in deep draughts as he walked along. The deep stillness which surrounded him—broken only now and then by the bark of a village dog in the distance—seemed to heighten within him the charm of unbroken calm and peace which rested upon the whole region.

He had just passed a group of gray beeches, which formed a corner of the wood and made a sharp turn in his path, when he saw that this beautiful picture of nature was not without its living accessories. A number of cows were grazing in the meadow which lay before him, and a few village urchins, bare-headed and bare-footed, were varying the monotony of watching the herd by playing lustily their childish games. Ewald

who to-day for the first time had taken the bandages from his arm, threw himself down in the high grass on the bank of a babbling, crystal stream, and gazed at the lovely scene around him. The hum of insects and the chirping of little birds in the bushes had a soothing influence and gradually the youth's head sank lower and lower, and in a few moments he was in dreamland with all its fantastic belongings.

Soon, however, he was rudely recalled to the realities of this world, and in a manner which filled him with horror and alarm. Loud and terrified cries from the playing children awakened him from his light slumber. He saw them running in all directions and each one striving, with his whole strength, to gain some point of safety. The cause of all this commotion was not long hidden from him, for an infuriated bull came stampeding over the meadow, with glaring eye and angry roar and head down.

For the moment Ewald felt no fear, for the animal was not running in his direction, and even if he did come his way the little stream lay between them. But the boy did not think of himself at all at this moment. Not all the children had been able to reach places of safety, and his heart beat with fear, for from the meadow there came the heartrending cries of a child who was creeping along, hoping to reach a place of safety, before the animal noticed him.

The child was a little boy about ten years of age, and he was crawling towards a mound where lay the little crutches which an ill-natured playmate had taken from him. The distance was diminishing between him and the animal, and Ewald saw with horror that there was no living creature near to help the little cripple. He felt how little use he was with his arm still weak, and a hundred adventurous thoughts passed through his mind

in a second ; he had read in some child's book that a cloth thrown over the bull's head would change its course—and without stopping to think of the danger involved in such a venture, or the skill required to make the throw, he rose and grasping his plaid upon which he had been lying, dashed through the brook, the water of which came to his knees, and started to head off the mad beast in its course. The bull seemed to surmise something of the sort for he deviated slightly from his course and came direct towards the new comer. There could be little doubt as to the result of this meeting, and Ewald knew now he would be the victim. He could hear the breathing of the terrible beast, and the arm which he held up with the cloth fell nerveless by his side and an uncontrollable desire came over him to close his eyes. Already he felt the great horns piercing his body—when from the wood came the sharp report of a rifle, followed by a terrific roar from the bull. Ewald saw to his astonishment that the powerful beast, scarcely five steps from him, had sunk on his knees ; evidently the shot had struck his leg. But the danger did not seem over, it was only averted for the instant. For with desperate effort the wounded animal again rose to its feet. A second shot sounded and this time a vital part was struck, instantly the great body trembled and writhed, and a second later fell with a heavy thud to the ground.

The danger was over !

Ewald turned hastily away from the tortuous spectacle, overpowered by the sense of the danger from which he had just escaped. His limbs trembled and his feet almost refused to do him service. But he forced this paroxysm of weakness from him and went to the crippled child, who was regarding him with wide open mouth and staring eyes, as if he were a being from another sphere. He vouchsafed no answer to Ewald's

sympathizing question, but as soon as he was assisted to his feet and his crutches handed him, he limped off as rapidly as his infirmity permitted. Ewald looked compassionately after the poor boy, but as he turned around he was surprised out of all self-command.

As if by magic, a young girl stood on the sward not far from him ; her nut-brown hair was flying around her shoulders, and under her arm she carried, after the manner of a sportsman, a double-barreled gun. In his confusion he made a quick motion to remove his hat, although it had fallen from his head when he started to run, and this movement, together with the perplexed expression on his face when he discovered he was hatless, amused the young girl greatly, and she burst out into a hearty laugh.

“Do not be angry with me, but you did look so comical,” sounded a clear, childish and musical voice. “One who can venture to overcome a wild ox with a shawl, should not show such fright at the sight of a harmless girl.”

Such a familiar speech was a means well calculated to dispel the young man’s embarrassment and give back to him his wonted self-composure. He summoned enough courage to answer her playful words in a jesting tone.

“Permit me in my own defence to explain that a wild ox is a much more usual sight than a maiden with a gun.”

“Ah—is that it! You are very ungrateful, sir, for truly, I would not like to think how it would have been with you now, if I had not had this weapon.”

“Is it possible that it was you who fired the two shots which saved me?”

“Certainly it was I! Is that so very wonderful? After six years practice, one should be able to do some-

thing better than shoot at the empty air, and it was certainly a lucky shot I made to-day."

Ewald's cheeks burned with a deep glow.

"You have saved my life, and I do not know how I can thank you."

The young gunner laughed and shook back her lovely hair.

"On my account, we will say nothing about that. You have reason to be grateful to fate's intervention as well as to me. But how in the world did it happen that you were just in the animal's way?"

Ewald told her in a few words how it had all happened, and when he had finished, she said, with much warmth in her tones: "That was very brave of you, but if I had not been out with the forester you would have paid dearly for your noble disregard of self. For your plaid would have been to no purpose, though that's all well enough to read to children. Perhaps you think I wander through the woods in order to hunt bears or kill robbers with this gun. But it is not my gun at all, and I just snatched it from the forester here, and it doesn't even belong to him. He had just returned with it from a deer shooting, and as I love sport I had been listening to his account of the hunt when we heard cries and ran to the edge of the wood to see why the children were screaming so lustily. What met our eyes was you, close to the beast and just in his path. The forester is only a moderate shot and he was afraid to attempt it at such a distance, so I seized the gun from his hands and—but you know the rest."

She motioned to the young hunter, who stood at a respectful distance, and gave him back his gun.

"If the animal is not dead yet you had better give him another shot," she said it in a friendly tone, but after the manner of one accustomed to obedience.

“And you had best tell the owner, he deserves to be the loser by his heedlessness, but my father will make it all right with him.”

While she was talking to her attendant Ewald found an opportunity to look at her attentively, and decided that he had never before seen so lovely or so graceful a being. She was simply attired in some soft, clinging material which only fell to her ankles, and wore a dark green jacket bound with green braid. A jaunty little cap with a bunch of pheasants' feathers was set upon her luxurious hair. Despite the simplicity of her attire she had an attractive and distinguished bearing, so much so, that the young man, although at least two years her senior, looked upon her with a sentiment of mingled admiration and awe.

As the forester turned away with a respectful bow to do her bidding, she turned again to her new acquaintance.

“You will catch cold,” she said, in her straightforward, chatty manner. “In your anxiety to become a rescuer you forgot that you got a good wetting—now, I have an idea. Come over to the Castle yonder with me, and you will be able, without doubt, to change your clothing.”

While speaking, she had pointed to the stately, gothic pile with the many glittering windows and the picturesque little towers, and Ewald was on the point of agreeing to her proposition, when he remembered the order Kostomarow had given him, not to go near the Castle. Although the temptation was very strong he resisted it bravely.

“I fear I shall not be able to accept your kind invitation as I have an appointment which I must soon keep,” he answered, “and moreover wet clothes will do me no harm in this mild air. The sun will dry them soon enough.”

“Well, perhaps it is just as well. You would be overwhelmed with questions, and I can easily imagine you would not find that agreeable. But if you have an appointment I must not detain you longer. It’s a shame, too, for we could have had a nice, little chat.”

Ewald hastened to assure her that he had plenty of time at his disposal yet, and he had never known a happier moment than that in which she sank down on the meadow grass, and motioned to him to do the same.

All was again still around them. The exciting event in which they had participated had not disturbed the deep peace of nature, and the insects kept up the same murmur, and the little birds twitted in the same minor key as before.

These two young people who knew not one another’s names were soon chatting together as if they had been life-long friends. In answering the very natural question where he lived, and how he came into this neighborhood, Ewald felt for the moment a hesitancy, but it seemed to him an impossibility to be anything but honest and candid with this frank, amiable creature. So she soon knew his story, and did not attempt to disguise how much interest she took in all he told her.

“So you are a musician, too,” she said, “and you will become an artist—a great artist. What a glorious aim you have in view. And if you achieve your purpose you will have justified your flight. What is your instrument?”

“The violin.”

“That is delightful! What a shame that the legendary treasure about which old Heilmann raves every day, is no longer in the Castle yonder. You would have to come and play something for me at once.”

“A legendary treasure? That has a very romantic sound.”

“Ah, and there is a romance about it. The treasure was a violin made by the great Stradivarius himself. It had been in the family several generations, and the grandfather of the present Baron was at one time offered by a connoisseur ten thousand thalers for it, but he would not part with it for any sum.”

“I can well believe it, for the best of those instruments are very valuable. But what became of this violin? It was not stolen, was it?”

“No, although no one knows exactly. The uncle of the present lord took it with him when he ran away from home. Neither he nor it has ever been heard of since, and doubtless both he and the precious violin have long since gone to ruin. Whenever I think of him this verse from Chamisso’s beautiful poem comes into my mind :

“I will steal away forever
With my soft lute in my hand,
To wander the wide world over,
And sing from land to land.”

Her voice was soft and full of feeling, and from her eyes shone a gleam of real sympathy.

Ewald thought she was even more beautiful than in her mirthful mood.

“What really became of this wonderful instrument might be a theme for a poet,” he said. “I have had the good fortune to play on a genuine Stradivarius myself. My old teacher and benefactor is its enviable possessor.”

“What’s your teacher’s name, and what does he look like?”

“His name is Kostomarow, but I cannot describe his appearance accurately to you, and it is by no means the

best of him. His countenance is like a death's head, he limps and—”

“Enough—enough !” she interrupted, laughing. “I'd much rather talk about you and your future. Where are you traveling now?”

“Where? If I but knew! Herr Kostomarow has given me no hint of his future movements, and he does not like to have me question him.”

“How singular! And you follow him without knowing what he intends to do with you? Your trust in him must be very great.”

“Oh, it is boundless! And you would revere him as deeply as I do, if you only heard him play once. When he takes his bow in his hand the whole depth of his nature is revealed.”

He described the old man's skill and art with enthusiasm, and his young companion listened attentively, and asked many questions which showed how deeply interested she was. The fifteen minutes had long since taken to themselves wings, and the sun had mounted still higher in his heavenly path, but the two prattlers chatted on, forgetful of time and place. The distant church bell sounded the hour and the light wind carried its solemn tones to the heedless pair in the meadow. Ewald glanced at his watch and sprang up hurriedly. It was already time that he should be at the place appointed, and he had a half-hour walk before he could reach the inn of the “Red Lion.” He felt deeply dejected, and over his companion's face, too, a shadow had fallen. She reached out her hands to bid him adieu, but still walked on by his side.

Once again Ewald tried to stammer out some word of thanks, and again she silenced him with friendly decision.

“I have saved your life,” she said. “That is true

enough ; but another would have done the same under like circumstances. I would like you to hold me in friendly remembrance in consideration of to-day."

The youth laid his hand upon his heart as he assured her earnestly that he would never forget her.

"Very well! When you have reached your goal, and are a great and celebrated artist, then seek for and repay me on your violin for having had the good fortune to save to the world the life of a genius."

He took the small, warm hand in his, while something like a sob mounted to his throat : "I swear I will do it! But where shall I find you? I do not even know your name."

They had now come to a cross way, which, a few steps farther on, led to the high road.

"We must part here" she said; "and perhaps when we meet again, it won't be at a great distance from here either. When you return, ask for the Countess Hertha Bassewitz of Hohenlinden, and you will soon be told where to find me. Until then, fare thee well, and—prosperity attend you."

She drew her hand away and turned quickly from him, as if to hide her face from his gaze. With light, elastic steps she returned across the undulating ground. Ewald watched her until a haze overspread his eyes, and his trembling lips murmured unconsciously her name. Then he turned and went quickly along the road. But the smiling landscape had lost for him all its charm. His heart was heavy. Had he learned in this hour the happiness and the pain of a first, pure love?

The sign of the "Red Lion," which swung in front of the inn, might at one time have possessed that color, but the red had long since disappeared, and the wind and rain had left little vestige of a lion of any color. The carriage was standing all ready to start again, and

Kostomarow himself sat at a round table before the inn door waiting. But he uttered no word of reproof to Ewald for his tardiness. He even pressed his hand a little more warmly than usual as he greeted him, and motioned to him silently to take his place in the carriage. They drove back by the same way which they had come, and when the carriage again reached the highest point in their way, Kostomarow once more bade the driver stop.

"You did not go near that Castle?" he asked, pointing to the magnificent residence.

"No, Herr Kostomarow, you had forbidden me."

"And you don't know what it is called? You don't know where we are?"

"I think it must be Castle Hohenlinden."

"You are wrong there, but I will tell you. That princely pile yonder is Buchwald Castle, and all the land around here, so far as the eye can reach, belongs to the Hardenegg estate. If you should return to your father, and become reconciled to him, and greet your future brother in friendly fashion, he would bring you here with him to this paradise, and you would perhaps lead as easy a life as though you had been born a member of this old, aristocratic family. So I give you the choice between hard work and slothful ease. But mark me well, boy! it is the last time!"

Ewald grew dizzy as he looked at this magnificent building, and splendid, fairy-like visions floated before his eyes. Doubtless Hertha von Bassewitz was a guest in this house. Might he not be able to see her daily and hourly, if he carried out the programme the musician had pointed out to him? Something like a great, irresistible power forced from his lips the words that should close the portals of happiness for him. For he seemed yet to hear Hertha's sweet voice, and it sounded in his

heart again. "When you have reached your goal and are a great and celebrated artist then seek for me—"

Sitting erect and speaking in a tone of decision he said, aloud :

"I choose the work, Herr Kostomarow ; I will remain with you !"

The old man motioned to the coachman to drive on.

"Very well, that settles it ! What I consider my duty I have done. I gave you time yesterday for undisturbed thought and to-day I showed you all that you would resign. Now, come what may, you can never say that I tried to deceive you or lead you astray. We have nothing more to detain us in the neighborhood of your natal city. To-day we will start for Paris, that you may pursue your studies under the best masters. And you will become a master of your art yourself, I am certain. There is no obstacle in the path of him who has the strength to overcome."

The young man sat silent and looked straight ahead. Had he not, in this decisive moment, overcome the feelings of his heart ? But Kostomarow could never know how hard a victory it had been for him.

CHAPTER VII.

The Baroness von Hardenegg and her guests had adjourned for their after-dinner coffee to the veranda, which opened from the north wing of the castle. The mistress of Buchwald was a fine, stately looking woman, whose years sat lightly upon her, and whose dignified manner and aristocratic bearing were not the least of many charms. To be sure, her features bore rather a cold and haughty expression when in repose, but they assumed a charming and amiable look when she smiled, and at such moments she appeared mild and benevolent. This smile had been part of herself since the arrival of the distinguished family.

She enlisted all her faculties to please these fastidious guests, ever-mindful to place herself, her worldly possessions, and last, but most important of all, her idolized son, in a favorable light. She was mistress of great conversational powers which she exerted to the utmost, and she was constant in devising new amusements for her visitors.

In the Countess Bassewitz, she found but a clumsy second. This pale, feeble woman had never been considered particularly bright in the circle in which she moved, and having for years suffered from some obstinate bodily ailment, her entire interests centered in her own person, and in the daughter whom she adored.

The Count was a solidly built man, no longer young, and browned by sun and wind. His manner and bearing, however, were rather those of a courtier than of a simple country gentleman, although he had been master of Hohenlinden since attaining his majority. His name

had been well known at the Capital in former years when he was for a short time a member of the Diet. His open opposition to many of the measures of the ministerial party, however, effectually closed the door to any ambition he might have cherished for distinction in the service of his sovereign. He soon became disgusted, therefore, with factional strife, and turned his back upon public life with a light heart, assuming the management of his extensive possessions with all the activity and perseverance of an energetic man. He had many lovable qualities, though he was considered very proud, and his usual manner was that of a superior to inferiors; but he could be very fascinating when he was really attracted to his companion. In spite of his wealth he led a very retired life at Hohenlinden manor, and his neighbors' attempts to establish friendly intercourse with him never met with more than formal returns, after which his exclusiveness would be more apparent than ever. Even with the Hardenegg family he had never been on terms of friendly intimacy. Many years ago, the late possessor of Buchwald had rendered him an important service, and solely as an acknowledgment of the debt he owed the dead, he took this occasion while traveling in the South to pay a visit to the widow of his whilom friend.

Of the hostess' plans concerning his daughter Hertha, he knew nothing; but the indications were that he would not be inimical to them. Already he had repeatedly expressed his appreciation of this beautiful place, and his approval of the excellent management which the estate was under, and in his intercourse with his hostess, he had manifested an especial affability and deference.

To-day as they sat on the balcony the conversation turned exclusively to the occurrences of the morning in

which the heroine was, of course, the Countess Hertha. The young hunter had brought the news to the castle where it had been received by the inmates in various fashions. The Baroness von Hardenegg had heard it all with no apparent excitement, but Hertha's mother, who was with her hostess at the moment, swooned; the Count made no secret of his joy and proud satisfaction in the possession of a daughter who could do such a brave deed. He declared that he would not only pay the owner for his dead animal, but he would give the poor of Frauensee—such was the name of the village—a considerable sum, in order that the occurrence might not soon fade from their memory.

He waited with impatience for the return of his daughter, but she was away unusually long, and when she at last appeared, just before dinner, he took her head between his hands and kissed her fresh lips most affectionately. Such caresses were not usual with the Count and were an undoubted indication of his great contentment, so that Hertha had good reason to be proud and satisfied. But she sat silent and depressed during all the discussions over her skill and presence of mind, and seemed more inclined to be moody than to rejoice.

Now they were all out on the veranda, whither their coffee had followed them, and the Count was smoking his usual after-dinner cigar. Hertha sat silent and listless, and no word of praise from her hostess could bring a smile of contentment to her face. A sound of wheels crunching along the pebbled carriage road was heard in the distance and Hertha exclaimed, as though glad of an opportunity to change the conversation:

“Visitors are coming, or perhaps the long expected Herr von Hardenegg has arrived at last.”



SHE SANK DOWN ON THE MEADOW GRASS, AND HE SAT DOWN BESIDE HER.—See Page 104.

A shadow passed over the Baroness' face. She knew that after his last telegram she need hardly expect to see her son, but she had not the courage to tell her guests how slight was her hope.

"That would be an unexpected joy," she said, "but if it be he, I think he should have sent some word announcing his arrival."

"Your son seems to find life very pleasant in the old artists' city," said the Countess, rather sharply. "You must look to it, my dear, or you will find him following his friend Brüning's example and putting away the sword for the brush or chisel."

"An ungrounded apprehension, Countess," said a manly voice from the glass door which led to the dining-saloon; "Mother Nature has denied me any talent in that direction."

All eyes were turned in the direction from whence the voice came, and with a cry of unrestrained joy, Frau von Hardenegg threw her arms around her son. Her heart beat high with warrantable pride as she gazed at his handsome, manly form, and in this moment she forgave him for all the anxiety and torture of the past few days. The greeting between the Count and his wife and Kurt was also warm and gracious. Frau von Hardenegg noted with inward pleasure that the Count was unmistakably attracted by her son, whom he had seen last as a boy. And Kurt's evident appreciation of Hertha's fresh and unquestionable beauty, when he was presented to her, renewed, more than anything else could have done, the mother's drooping spirits. He seemed to find it difficult to take his eyes off Hertha's face, and he treated her not as a child but as a grown woman who should receive all possible attention from the opposite sex.

"We regret extremely that you have returned home just on the eve of our departure, Herr von Hardenegg,"

said Count Bassewitz. "But you were doubtless detained by something very urgent?"

"I was indeed. I had an opportunity to obtain some important information concerning a member of our own family, and that, in connection with another matter, detained me. By the way, you are interested in art, Count. Did you ever know an historical painter named Balthasar Stiller?"

Bassewitz smiled contemptuously.

"How did you come to hear of him? He is a fool who insists upon making an exhibition of his meaningless pictures until one refuses to have anything to say to him."

"Hm! Certainly he is following out a fancy of his own, but on the whole there is a great deal to be said in his defence. I, myself, purchased a picture from him, while I was on my visit to Brüning."

"Out of pity, perhaps. It seems too bad that he paints such daubs. I doubt if you'll ever hang his picture in one of your saloons."

Kurt von Hardenegg colored to the very roots of his hair.

"And yet, Count," he answered, hastily, "I have decided to hang this painting, which you have so sharply condemned, but have never seen, in a conspicuous place, for it is of peculiar value to me."

Count Bassewitz glanced up at him astonished. The almost violent tone had surprised and unmistakably annoyed him.

"Well, whatever your taste may be, it is certainly no matter of dispute, my dear Herr von Hardenegg," he said, coldly. "Will you have the goodness, Baroness, to excuse me for a short time? My head-overseer must be sent word that he is to expect us to-morrow. Permit me to offer you my arm, my dear Gabrielle."

The Countess rose with a sigh. Hertha, who had been sitting leaning listlessly against the stone balustrade, sprang to her feet.

"I am going over to Frauensee, Papa," she said. "I must see for myself, that little lame Peter has not been injured by his fright."

Kurt turned quickly towards her as if he meant to offer to accompany her. But he appeared suddenly to have another thought, for he contented himself with bowing and then watching her graceful form until it had disappeared behind a hedge in the park.

His mother stood by with compressed lips, and finally tapped him on the shoulder.

"You have conducted yourself in a charming manner, Kurt! Why in the world were you so impolite to the Count?"

"I only repaid him in his own coin. It was he who annoyed me at first."

"He annoyed you? Merely because he gave his opinion regarding an obscure painter. You are, as far as I know, no connoisseur yourself."

"No matter! You will perhaps understand later more clearly the reasons for my righteous indignation."

"Well, it is desirable that I should; for I must confess I am at a loss to comprehend your behavior. As you had the misfortune to vex the Count, why did you not, at least, offer to accompany his daughter?"

Hardenegg looked for a moment in the direction in which Hertha had disappeared. Then he passed his hand over his eyes.

"His daughter? Bah, she is only a child yet!"

Frau von Hardenegg's countenance assumed its coldest and severest expression.

“A child who in a few months will be a young woman. Who knows whether you will find her inclined to accept your knightly homage after she has had opportunities to compare you with others.”

“I should not be angry with her for that, Mamma. As for the rest, I am grateful to this noble family for giving me the opportunity to speak to you immediately. Perhaps you will permit me to lead you into the house.”

The Baroness took his arm ; but it was very evident from her mien that with the pleasure of his return were mingled other and less agreeable sensations. When they reached her small, luxuriously furnished boudoir she sat down stiffly on the nearest chair.

“Now I am ready to hear you. Your news concerns Botho Hardenegg, I presume?”

“Yes, but of him, later. I am egotistical enough to speak first of what concerns myself more especially. A few words will tell you all. I am engaged to be married.”

The Baroness did not appear as deeply shocked as Kurt had feared. She had wonderful control over herself and did not lose her self-command very readily. But her face was hard and stern and her brow contracted.

“Nothing more than that?” she asked, with cutting sarcasm. “It is certainly good of you to bring me this joyful news yourself.”

Kurt drew his chair closer to hers and spoke in a persuasive tone, trusting he could in this way put the conversation on a friendly footing.

“Let us not continue in this tone, dear Mother,” he begged. “It would almost seem as if you wanted to prevent my giving you a clear explanation, and if that were your object it would be annoying for us both.

Your plan in regard to the Countess Hertha was undoubtedly excellent, and I shall always remain grateful to you for the motherly love and solicitude which prompted it. But you cannot be angry with me when I tell you that I have followed the prompting of my own heart. Countess Hertha is a child—an unusually lovely child, I am free to acknowledge, but much too young, when we consider the idea you had conceived. Even if she were older, I must decline with thanks the honor of becoming the Count's son-in-law; for my heart has already decided for me in another quarter."

"How interesting! A genuine love match—how very romantic!"

Kurt knew from the ironical tone that he could not avoid a battle, and became impatient.

"Yes, Mamma, a genuine love match! I think that I may now indulge in such a luxury—Botho Hardenegg is dead. He died over twelve years ago in Siberia, whither he had been transported. Nobody will come to quarrel with me over a penny of our fortune. Why should I think exclusively of increasing it, instead of looking to my own future happiness and well being? After all, I'm no reigning monarch, upon whom such a sacrifice is forced, for reasons of state."

He bit the end of his moustaches, for his mother's stony face robbed him of all composure.

"Your speech is not reassuring, and does not awaken within one pleasurable anticipations regarding your choice. Would it not be simpler if you were to tell me her name without so many high-flown words?"

"Certainly, you shall hear it immediately. She is the daughter of the painter, Balthasar Stiller, about whom I have just been talking with Bassewitz."

His mother's eyes opened wider, and she clutched convulsively at the handkerchief which lay on her lap.

She restrained any exhibition of anger, but laughed loudly, as she threw her head back on her chair cushion.

“Charming, charming! And this accounts for your bitterness against the Count. And did not you find, my dear Kurt, that you had recompensed the painter’s daughter sufficiently when you purchased the father’s picture? In such cases* one is not obliged to talk of betrothals or the like.”

She had not been silenced or turned from her purpose by the angry color which mounted to her son’s brow, although it had by no means escaped her notice. She followed his movements with steady gaze as he rose and paced back and forth in the room. But now he stood in front of her and there was a look of decision in his face, which made her, in spite of her apparent calm, quake inwardly.

“I did not expect, Mother, that you would go into ecstasies over my choice, and I realized that I would in all probability meet with some opposition from you. But I do desire, and it is as well to understand me fully, that you should speak respectfully of the young lady whom I consider worthy to become the wife of an Hardenegg.”

“But, good heavens! Kurt, you cannot think seriously of enacting this Mardi gras scene in real life?”

“The betrothal is an accomplished fact, and my honor is at stake.”

“A thoughtless word cannot bind you so long as you do not receive my consent.”

She was excited enough now, but her son’s bearing was both decided and resolute.

“I came here to beg for your consent. It will be, naturally, of the greatest value to me; but I cannot forbear calling your attention to the fact that it is not an absolute necessity.”

“Ah, you treat this affair as if I were of no account, and beg for my blessing for form’s sake only. It appears to me that under such circumstances it would be superfluous to discuss the matter further.”

“No, it is not superfluous, for I wish to discuss it so that it will be fully understood between us. I should assume an attitude, as unworthy as it would be untenable, if I endeavored to delay making a detailed statement of my plans. There are various necessary preparations which admit of no delay. For instance, I must send in my resignation to-day. I implore you, dear Mother, with all my heart, to try to overcome this prejudice, and to become reconciled to the unalterable, for the sake of my future happiness.”

Tears of anger glittered in the mother’s eyes.

“I cannot conceive that it is my only son who speaks to me thus. But you want to hear my final decision, so I will now say my last word on this subject. I will never recognize as my daughter a creature of such low birth—do you hear? Never! You have to choose between her and me. In the moment when you decide seriously on such an insane course, you and I are parted forever.”

“Mother!”

“I have nothing more to say. Even if every vestige of filial affection is dead within you, it would be well for you to remember before it be too late, that you will be the first Hardenegg to stain your escutcheon.”

The Baron’s lips formed themselves into a bitter smile.

“Your reference to the Hardenegg family honor was not a happy one, Mother. Did I not tell you that my uncle Botho came to his glorious end while escaping from banishment in Siberia?”

“Oh, that’s the fable of an impostor who was specu-

lating on your credulity. I knew this Botho, and can tell you that while he was a fool, he was no criminal."

"And even if it is a fable, need we go back to discover a blemish on our escutcheon? You desire my engagement to an inexperienced child, and my own father stretched out his hands for what did not belong to him. He squandered his own fortune as well as part of your marriage portion, without remembering his obligations to either you or me, and he laid hands upon his brother's possession, not knowing the day nor the hour when the absent one might return. I beg you, Mother, don't take this high and mighty tone of injured innocence with me. We are alone, and might as well call things by their proper names. I intend no reproof, although perhaps it would have been better to discuss the situation of affairs at another time, when there might be a possibility of effacing the stain upon the family honor. Now nothing can be changed, and our future happiness will be what we make it. But you can see that it will be better for us to leave certain things out of the play, and not treat my *mésalliance* so tragically."

While he was speaking Frau von Hardenegg had risen from her seat, and drawing herself up to her full height moved slowly towards the door.

"I am not inclined to continue a conversation of such an unfitting nature with my own child. You have heard my ultimatum and can order your course accordingly."

She scorned to wait for a reply, and left the room as she finished speaking.

Kurt stamped his foot impatiently on the carpet.

"It is insufferable!" he muttered between his closed teeth. "I'll bring all this bandying of words to an end with a short turn!"

When Frau von Hardenegg received her guests in the supper-room that evening, there was nothing in either

her manner or appearance to betray the stormy scene of the afternoon. Kurt also appeared bright and unconcerned, and not even the keenest observer could have imagined that any but the most friendly relations existed between mother and son. Count Bassewitz was at the same time very cool and dignified. He had not forgotten the discourteous treatment he had received earlier in the day, and was not inclined to expose himself to any repetitions. The Baron made various ineffectual attempts to draw him into conversation and devoted himself at last to the Countess Hertha, whose beauty had made a far deeper impression upon him than one would have imagined from his slighting speeches to his mother.

“Tell me, Herr von Hardenegg,” said the Countess von Bassewitz, suddenly awakening from her usual apathy, “do these artists live such free Bohemian lives in the city? I have just been reading something of the sort in a novel. It must be in truth a very Sodom and Gomorra.”

“I think, Countess, that the author of your novel must have been guilty of frivolous exaggerations to give you ground for such suppositions. The only artist with whom I have any acquaintance at all, with the exception of Brüning—and that is the painter Stiller—leads a truly exemplary life with his family; in fact, such an exclusive life that I, for some time, had little hope of being admitted to it.”

“For some time? I hardly understand that.” The Countess had asked this question negligently, without any apparent interest. Frau von Hardenegg understood Kurt’s object, and for a moment mother and son looked at one another, with eyes which had no friendly gleam.

“Doubtless a jest whose point we do not see, dear

friend," said the hostess, in sharp tones. But her hope that she would silence her son was a vain one. Kurt bit the end of his moustaches, but if his heart beat more rapidly, he at least succeeded in smiling.

"No, my dear Mother, why should not our highly esteemed friends know at once, that which will so soon be known by the world at large. I have become engaged since my sojourn in the old artists' city to an amiable and charming girl, named Elfriede Stiller, and I hold myself very fortunate that I have been able to win her for my bride."

A profound silence followed this startling and coolly spoken announcement. Frau von Hardenegg seemed for the moment to be convulsed with pain. Then she sat like a statue of despair, colorless, with clasped hands lying in her lap and her eyes fixed immovably upon the carpet at her feet. It was good she did not see the astonished and by no means friendly look which passed over the Countess' face. Count Bassewitz remained unmoved, and was as cool and unconcerned as he had been all evening, and when after a long and painful pause he broke the silence, his words had that polite, precise tone which under certain circumstances cuts deeper than any open affront.

"We are indebted to you, Herr von Hardenegg, for the honor you have done us in confiding in us," he said, "and I consider it my duty to apologize to you for having unwittingly annoyed you by criticising your future father-in-law's paintings. In relation to this matter between yourself and the historical painter, Stiller, I could not—as you will readily understand—have had the slightest suspicion."

He had entirely ignored Kurt's last words, and had uttered no wish for his future happiness, but the tones

of his voice told more fully than words could have done his feeling of contempt for such an alliance.

Kurt bit his under lip. He dared not show that he had been insulted, and it cost him dear to restrain the hasty words which rose to his lips.

The only one who appeared neither surprised nor annoyed was the Countess Hertha.

“You are going to marry a painter’s daughter, Herr von Hardenegg?” she asked, unconcernedly. “Then, of course she is beautiful?”

“Yes, Countess, she is indeed! Beautiful, virtuous and worthy of all honor. A Prince’s daughter could not be more richly dowered.”

“That is charming. Ah, I shall do my best to win her friendship. If Papa buys the estate of Lankenau and we become your neighbors, we shall see much of one another.”

Count Bassewitz had risen.

“I think we had better retire, dear Gabrielle. As we have to return home early in the morning, you will need the rest.”

“You are right, my dear. To-day I have had too much excitement and a great surprise.”

She accompanied the last words with a significant smile. Then she held out her hand to her hostess.

“Good-night, dearest; and if—but pardon me for my forgetfulness—I wish you great joy in your son’s new-found happiness. How charming it will be for you later. An artist’s home with exhibitions and costume festivals. What a shame it is that our fatal prejudices will rob us of an opportunity of seeing it all.”

The Baroness had received these ironical good wishes in silence, and Kurt bowed without speaking as the aristocratic pair turned to leave the room, but their malicious guest had a bitter pill in preparation for him also.

“One need not wish a lover happy dreams,” she said, smiling. “The picture of your beautiful bride—does it compare with her name? Müller, if I am not mistaken, or Lehmann?—How well it sounds.”

“The future Baroness von Hardenegg is now called Elfriede Stiller, Countess.”

“Yes, I knew it was something like that. Well, I trust that the image of your lovely and worthy-of-all-honor bride will hover over you. Good-night!”

Then the couple departed. Hertha delayed a moment, then stepped up to Hardenegg and whispered to him:

“Give her my warmest congratulations. I am rejoiced at the thought of knowing her.”

Mother and son were alone; but as he turned hastily towards her, she motioned her hand to keep him back.

“God forgive you for what you have done. I will never pardon this humiliation. A Hardenegg who discards his honor is no son of mine.”

The Baron looked with kindling eye at her.

“Do not go to extremes, Mother, I beg you!”

“You understand me; but see that the hussy does not cross the threshold of Buchwald while I remain under its roof. I ask no great sacrifice, for I will leave here as soon as I can make my preparations.”

With head high in the air she passed by him. Kurt made a motion as if to stop her, but the cold, haughty expression of her face prevented him.

He heard the rustle as the portière fell together again, and his clenched hand dropped heavily upon the upholstered arm of the sofa. From his knitted brow and tightly drawn lips it was evident that the effect of his recent resolution was not a matter of unconcern and indifference to him.

He had begun the battle and he would fight it out at any cost. But the wounds which his pride had received in this first affray were deeper and more painful than he himself realized at present.



CHAPTER VIII.

The summer was over with its days of sunshine and of shadow; already the rude storms of autumn were sweeping through the grand old forests which surrounded the family seat of the Hardeneggs.

The leaves of the trees were bright with many colors, and the last of the roses had faded upon the castle terrace. The golden fields of waving corn had disappeared and the meadows had lost their emerald hue. Nature was preparing herself for her long, cold sleep; for that slumber which to so many living things is the sleep of death.

For the past few days, wagon after wagon of furniture, paintings and other household adornments had been arriving at the castle.

The Baron von Hardenegg—his visiting cards still bore his military title, "Captain of Horse Dragoons, A. D."—was soon to be married and was adorning his home for its new mistress. He had been at Buchwald for the past two weeks, in order that he might personally oversee and superintend all arrangements. His mother's rooms, though she herself had been gone several months, were also put in thorough order, as if her return to her old home were expected at any moment. But when the servants put their heads together in their own domain, they

whispered to one another that their old mistress would never come back.

The young couple were to be married in the simple village church at Frauensee. Such had ever been the custom of the Hardenegg family, and the villagers would have taken it very ill if the present Baron had denied them the privilege of seeing him wedded.

The old pastor who had married Kurt's parents was still living, and it seemed but fitting that this worthy old man should give the son his blessing.

The evening before the marriage, Balthasar Stiller and his family arrived at Buchwald. All the officials and servants of the estate were gathered at the castle entrance to welcome the master's young bride. There was no special formality and but few words were spoken at the time; but the people were unanimous in their expressions of surprise and delight over the beauty and the heart-winning amiability of the young bride. To be sure, she looked rather pale, and the valet de chambre who had grown old in the family's service shook his head significantly: "She does not look happy, and a sad bride brings no luck into the house!"

Now the important morning had arrived, a mild autumn day, reminding one of the glories of the summer just past.

Already in the early morning hours, numbers of the guests had begun to arrive, principally Herr Stiller's artist friends with their families. Kurt's old-time comrades and the aristocratic county families were but sparingly represented, although in sending out the invitations he had taken care that none should be forgotten.

Nearly all had, under this or that pretext, given Kurt to understand, to his deep anger, that they would turn their backs most unequivocally upon a Baron who

could make such a *mésalliance*. In order to spite them, and his mother as well, Kurt resolved to have as much display and splendor as was possible at his marriage. He knew that by doing so, he by no means carried out Elfriede's wishes; but he could not deny himself the balm which even this trifling matter gave to his mortified feelings.

The Baron was on the point of calling his valet to put the finishing touches to his toilet, when old Heitmann, with disturbed countenance, hastily entered his dressing-room.

"What's the matter?" asked Hardenegg. "Why have you such a despairing look? Has anything happened?"

"Ah, yes, gracious Herr!—but I will not frighten you for I do not know whether it is anything serious or not. But the old pastor's assistant is at the door; he wishes to speak to you at once, if you will receive him."

"Old gossip," muttered Kurt to himself, but he added aloud: "I will see this assistant, if it is a matter of such great importance."

He had never bothered himself about the church affairs in the village and had never heard until this minute that the pastor had an assistant. He turned his head indifferently now as the door opened; but as he glanced at the thin figure clad in black which stood upon the threshold, a gleam like lightning passed across his face.

"Herr Werner, if I am not mistaken?" came hastily and unamiably from his lips.

The other bowed politely and said, quietly, in his earnest, deep-toned voice: "At your service, Herr von Hardenegg, now the pastor's assistant in the parish of Frauensee."

Their eyes met. The Baron's wore a look of astonish-

ment, and were searching, indeed almost threatening. John Werner's clear and mild eyes did not sink beneath them for a single moment.

"I come as the bearer of unfortunate news," he said. "It will be impossible for Herr Valentine to perform your marriage service to-day. He had a severe fainting attack early this morning, and now lies in an extremely weak condition. His physician says it will be impossible for him to leave his room for a week at least."

"What an unfortunate accident! And now? What are we to do?"

"Either the ceremony must be delayed, or I shall have to perform it instead of Pastor Valentine."

Hardenegg endeavored to read the speaker's face; but on this pale, earnest countenance lay such perfect peace, that the Baron concluded he had erred in his former suppositions.

"I will answer you frankly," he said, after thinking a moment, "that this is a very serious matter to me, and that I would decide unhesitatingly to delay the church service, if I saw any way to do it. But your announcement comes too late to make any change possible. The guests are assembled and all the preparations are made. So nothing remains to me but to accept your services."

Werner bowed his head.

"Very well, Herr von Hardenegg. And have you any special wishes concerning the ceremonies?"

"No, I do not understand anything about the customary formalities and so will leave it all to you. But I'll count on you to make it as short as possible. Of course"—it evidently cost him an effort to speak—"you will understand that I shall hope to receive you as my guest for the rest of the day."

The earnest face of the assistant signified neither

refusal nor acceptance of this invitation, as he bowed silently and left the room. Kurt looked after him with a fretted face.

“An unpleasant person,” he thought, “and a most singular accident to find him here and in the way for the second time. It almost looks as if I had been intentionally deceived. But I can settle all that very soon now !”

The little incident had put him in a bad humor. But his vexation was changed to rapture when he beheld Elfriede an hour later in her bridal attire. How maidenly and tender and how supremely beautiful she looked, with her tall, graceful figure attired in white and shimmering silk ; how gracious her youthful face appeared beneath its myrtle diadem and under the rich lace veil which enveloped her from head to foot. But there was no gleam of transcendent happiness on her pale countenance, and her lovely eyes showed traces of scarcely dried tears. But such traces were readily explained by the natural agitation which so important an event in her life would call forth, and seemed neither strange nor blamable.

With a few tender words spoken in tribute to her beauty, he kissed her hand in courtly homage. For her father, who was nearly overcome by the proud happiness of this day, he had also a hearty greeting. Then he led Elfriede over the costly carpets strewn with flowers, down to the elegant, bridal carriage drawn by four horses which tossed their beplumed heads proudly in the air. In stately fashion he assisted her to enter the carriage, and the wedding guests immediately followed their example ; and soon the train of equipages was moving through the still, autumn-tinted valley down to the village below.

“My beloved wife !” whispered Kurt, as he took her

hand and tenderly kissed her lips. "How unspeakably happy you have made me this day. How ardently and how long I have wished for this hour!"

His eyes sought hers; but Elfriede looked out sadly over the landscape. "And your mother?" she asked. "She has not come and she has not written me. Why did you not tell me sooner that she was not my friend?"

"It would not have helped the matter, dear love! It would only have given you unnecessary sorrow, and some vexatious hours. My mother's prejudices are so deep-rooted that scarcely any reasoning would overcome them, and certainly not within a few weeks or months. The only way to reach her is to let her grow accustomed to an immutable, accomplished fact. And we are now on the point of accomplishing that." He spoke in an excited, pained tone, and it annoyed him that Elfriede gave no other response than a sigh.

"But you should not reprove me, my love, for my silence," he continued, after a short pause, "for I have just made a discovery of a circumstance about which I have been kept in the dark, and which would have been a matter of interest to me."

She looked up at him questioningly. "But not by me? Do you believe that I have been concealing from you?"

"Oh, no, that is hardly the right expression to use. But did not you know that your old friend, young Werner, had been made the assistant pastor at Fraunensee?"

He was not quite certain whether or not he perceived a faint color pass over her face; but if so it faded away as quickly as it had come and no change was apparent in her countenance.

"Certainly," she replied, "I knew it very well. But

you never spoke of him, and I was not aware that you took any interest in him."

"And shall not your friends be mine also? And all the more when they live in our vicinity?"

This time there was no mistaking the look of disturbance on her face.

"Is it of John Werner you speak? How can he be in our neighborhood?"

"Those red roofs below us, my dear Elfriede, are the houses of Frauensec. I thought I had certainly told you the name of the village before now."

She did not answer, but leaned far back on the white silk cushions and gazed fixedly at the bouquet of lovely flowers which lay in her lap. Hardenegg frowned slightly. The construction which he put upon her manner was such as to make him uneasy.

"If you regard this piece of news as so surprising, you will certainly be much more astonished to hear that it is he who is to perform the marriage service for us to-day."

Elfriede was in no condition to conceal her fright from his distrustful eyes.

"That is impossible!" she said, giving him an anxious glance, "you yourself told me of an old clergyman, who had married your parents—"

Hardenegg did not answer at once. He saw the little tower of the village church between the tree tops and not far distant from them now.

"And I spoke the truth!" he answered, in an almost hard tone. "But Herr Valentine, the pastor, was taken suddenly ill to-day, and just at the last moment I learned that Werner was his assistant. The man is not sympathetic to me, but it was too late to change our arrangements. I was forced to accept the inevitable, but it

surprises me a little to note that you seem laboring under some unaccountable excitement."

At this moment the church bells began to peal forth their welcome to the bridal pair. The horses were drawn up, and Elfriede had now no time to respond to Kurt's words. She allowed him to lift her from the carriage and she walked by his side over the flower strewn ground, which the village children had decked for them, and into the house of God. She felt it necessary to lean on the Baron's arm, otherwise her strength would hardly have supported her. She saw nothing of the sunbeams which made a broad path of light on the stones at her feet, nor of the bright, gay throng which were around her. Hysterical tears darkened her eyes, which she did not venture to raise from the ground; she seemed afraid of seeing something unbearable and frightful.

Just in front of the simple altar stood the stools for the bridal pair. At the same moment in which they kneeled, the bells ceased ringing and the organ burst into full melody, while children's voices sounded loud and clear, as they sang their hymn of joy. There was much whispering and fluttering among the guests who formed a glittering semi-circle around the altar rail. Now all became suddenly silent as the organ's last note died away and the clergyman mounted the stair and turned towards the bridal pair. His bearing was upright and his countenance full of quiet earnestness. In his long robes he appeared no longer haggard and thin, but manly and almost stately. The warm, deep glance of his earnest, gray eyes was as inspiring and forceful as the deep but melodious tones of his voice. Little knew they who listened to his reverent words that he was repeating that which completely destroyed all his own hopes of happiness.

“Where thou goest, there will I go also; where thou remainest there will I be. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God shall be my God. Where thou liest, there lie I also!”

While he was speaking Kurt regarded him with fixed attention. For Elfriede's manner had awakened anew within him the old jealous feeling, and he sought in the clergyman's manner some corroboration for his distrust. But in this face there were no fluctuations. Once when a ray of sunlight passed across his face one might have noticed a deadly pallor. Truly, if this man's soul were filled with an earthly love for the woman who knelt before him, and whom he was now joining to another, he must indeed have had a bitter conflict with his own heart, and have come out from it like a hero. Such complete dissimulation was impossible; his peace must have come to him after a terrible struggle, with God alone to know what it had cost him.

His address was short, as the Baron had wished, but it was earnest and forcible. Within that little circle there were many wet eyes, but those of the bride were not numbered among them.

Elfriede had now obtained the victory over herself; but all this had come upon her too suddenly and unexpectedly for her to find peace so soon. She heard all that was going on about her as if in a dream, and half unconsciously she did what usage demanded of her. She knelt at Kurt's side and a shudder crept through her when she heard his loud “yes,” which reached to the farthest corners of the church as he responded to the customary questions. Then Werner turned to her with the same questions. For the first time his voice threatened to break; but he was not the man to be overcome by weakness now. Elfriede's lips trembled. Her “yes” was scarcely more than a fluttering breath.

It was not audible to the wedding guests, but the two to whom alone it signified, the Baron and the clergyman, heard it.

Werner changed the rings and gave his blessing to the newly married pair. Then the organ pealed forth again with deep sound, and the children chanted their song of rejoicing; the solemn service was at an end.

Already in the Sacristy the young pair were receiving the congratulations of friends and acquaintances. Balthasar Stiller's happiness was beyond expression, but he had to content himself with embracing Elfriede most demonstratively; then he took Brüning's offered arm and permitted himself to be led to the carriage.

Among the bridal party there were none so charming and lovely as Marguerite. The joy over her sister's good-fortune, and the almost childish rapture over the change in her own life were clearly visible in her bright, clear eyes. As was natural, her youthful grace and beauty attracted both attention and admiration. No one was quicker to recognize her many attractions than a man of about thirty years of age whom Kurt had expressly commanded to be her cavalier for the day. He had been presented to Marguerite by Kurt himself as his dearest and oldest friend, and his name was Baron Hartmuth von Rhoden. There was nothing in his personal appearance to attract general attention, but it was uncommon enough to impress a young girl who had seen nothing of the world.

He was a middle sized man with a lithe and sinewy figure, he had a haggard, sharply cut profile, and his dark, flashing eyes betokened a hot-blooded, quick-tempered nature. His movements were quick and his manner of speaking was often almost vehement and at

times boisterous. He was undoubtedly a witty and interesting companion, all the more so when he spoke of his own experiences. For five years he had been a wanderer over all the inhabited earth, in order to satisfy his love for adventure, particularly in the field of sport. He could paint in glowing colors his hunts in the north for bear or bison, or describe the tiger-king caught in an Indian jungle. He was not only a bold hunter but a venturesome rider. Any one who cast his eye over the sporting columns of the day's papers was sure to find his name there. Baron Rhoden was not only the happy possessor of many horses which had won in the ring, but he often mounted them himself in order to assure himself of victory in the field.

Such a union of knightly qualities Marguerite had never before met in any man within the narrow confines of her secluded life, and it is not to be wondered at, that she was, for the time at least, charmed with her new acquaintance, and did not conceal her pleasure. But after a while his presence seemed to burden her; there was no escape, and she at times had indeed a feeling of fright.

He was her neighbor at table and monopolized all her attentions. No one had ever spoken to her as he had done. In his dark eyes, which followed her every motion, was an expression which reminded one of a cat preparing to pounce on his unsuspecting victim. More than once his words conveyed a deeper significance than was spoken, which made Marguerite shudder although she did not comprehend them.

The wedding banquet was enlivened by many grandiloquent toasts and some rather startling surprises. As these last proceeded for the most part from the artists, the result was, that the feast very soon lost its aristocratic character. The merry company which had

assembled to celebrate the unexampled good fortune of their fellow artist, gradually gave manner and tone to the whole affair. The Baron noticed this with growing discomfort. He would perhaps have done the same himself in an artist's lodging, but it did not please him in his own house. He thought to give Herr Stiller a suggestive wink, but his father-in-law was the ring-leader of them all, and Hardenegg had but to look in his eyes to recognize that he need look for no assistance in that quarter. And before the banquet ended he had another unpleasant surprise to encounter, for John Werner's pale, earnest face was visible in the place which had been reserved for him.

"The man has taken me at my word and accepted my invitation," he thought. "I should have imagined that on this occasion, at least, he would not have intruded."

After the feast was over, the regimental band of the nearest garrison played for dancing in the great hall. The doors which led out to the long balconies were partly open and the soft fragrant summer-like air rushed in and tempered the heat for the dance.

They danced in gay measure to the merry strains, and no one revelled more joyously in the pleasure of the hour than did Marguerite.

Baron Rhoden had just led her again to her place and had turned for a moment to speak to Hardenegg, who just then appeared in their vicinity, when a young man with a handsome, open countenance and a certain diffidence of manner, approached Marguerite.

"Permit me, Fräulein, to introduce myself to you as Forest-Inspector Reinach, and beg for the honor of the next dance."

His voice had a pleasant sound, and his friendly brown eyes had such a beseeching glance that Marguerite was ready to accede to his request. She had

already risen to take his arm, when Baron Rhoden turned around almost violently.

“Excuse me, Sir,” he said, gruffly and almost rudely to Reinach. “I believe I have an older claim; Fräulein Stiller promised me this dance earlier in the day.”

It was a falsehood, and Marguerite opened her lips to contradict him when she met his glance; that dark, vulture-like look, which exercised such power over her. She, who had always been so courageous and fearless, now felt an uncontrollable fear of this man, a fear which for the moment overcame her love of truth.

While her lovely face flushed painfully, she answered, in a low voice, without raising her eyes: “The Baron is correct. I had forgotten that I promised him this dance.”

Reinach released her arm from within his. He vouchsafed no glance toward Rhoden, but bowed with cool politeness to Marguerite.

“In that case I beg your pardon.” Then he stepped back, and disappeared in the gay crowd. Marguerite’s bright eyes filled with tears of anger and shame at herself.

“There is no doubt he knew I was lying to him,” she said in her heart. “And why, why did I do so?”

She thought she would seek him out and explain it all to him, but at this moment Rhoden took her hand and placed it on his arm. It seemed as though some witchery had possession of her. Here she had just made up her mind to reprove him sharply for his duplicity, and now the halter was again around her throat. She was powerless against his strong will, and was soon whirling in the mazes of the dance with half-closed eyes.

But her pleasure had been greatly marred by this little incident. To be sure, she had done no more than

happens a hundred times at every ball, yet she felt depressed by the consciousness of wrong doing. With half an ear only did she listen to the Baron's conversation, for her eyes were constantly seeking for the young man with the good face and the pleading eyes. She discovered him at last leaning with folded arms against a window seat.

"He is not dancing any more," she thought. "My hateful conduct has deprived him of all pleasure. What must he think of me?"

She went through the final figure of the german with a lighter heart and step, and received her favors and pretty gifts with pleasure. She was smiling now, for her opportunity would soon come to make amends to Herr Reinach. She started toward him with her favor in her hand as soon as the dance ended, but he, perceiving her approach, turned abruptly and left his place.

Marguerite colored violently and stood still for a moment. How gladly she would have hidden her face from view with her flowers, and rushed from the room had that been possible.

A light touch on her arm made her look up. Again it was Rhoden who had followed her like a shadow. She believed that an ironical smile played around his lips.

"Are you going to give me this as a token of your regard, Fräulein Marguerite?" he asked, softly.

And without another word she pinned the favor with trembling fingers on his breast.

Since early morning Elfriede had sought in vain for an undisturbed moment. How much she had dreaded this day and how surely she had felt that all her strength would be needed to carry her through it. The course of events had, however, far outstripped her worse anticipations. It was only by the greatest exertion that she

was able to do what her duties as a bride demanded, but her weary, forced smile was the smile of a face as colorless as a statue. Hardenegg had scarcely left her side ; but now during the figures of a dance she found an opportunity to escape unperceived through a half open door out upon the balcony.

The sun had long since set, and over the landscape lay the deep shadows of a moonless night. Elfriede shuddered ; but the clear, cold evening air revived her as she leaned her heated brow against a marble vase set in the stone balustrade. She had laid her veil and wreath aside long since ; but the heavy folds of her white bridal robes still clung to the graceful figure. Coming as she did from the sea of light within to the shadow without, she had not seen anything but the darkness ; but as her eyes grew accustomed to the shadows she noticed not far from her, and but partly concealed by the tall plants which adorned the balcony, the outlines of a manly form.

Whether in her first surprise she gave a little cry or not she could not tell ; at any rate she had attracted the man's attention, for he made a step towards her. And in the next instant they recognized one another.

"John Werner—you?" came from the trembling lips of the young wife as she stretched forth her hands as if to shield herself from a threatened danger. For the moment the clergyman almost lost his self-command, then he bowed quietly.

"Pardon me, Frau von Hardenegg," he said. "It was not my object to disturb you."

He would have left the balcony ; but Elfriede detained him.

"Why do you fly from me? Do you consider that an indication of friendship?"

All the unspoken bitterness which she had that day

endured broke forth in that simple question. Werner remained standing, but it was more surprise than vexation that sounded in his reply.

“Not an indication of friendship, but a consideration of duty. It was your desire for undisturbed quiet which brought you out here !”

“Yes ! But I am thankful for this accident which enables me to ask you a question—a question which has been on my heart the whole day long. Must I think, John, that you avoided me, that you might not hear it ?”

“When have I given you reason to think so little of me ?”

“I know now, when I am able to think by myself, how much I merit my own anger and contempt.”

She was not strong enough now to keep back the feelings with which her heart had been nearly breaking all day. Her bosom heaved and she buried her burning face in her hands.

Werner had stepped near to her.

“Elfriede,” he said, in mild, earnest tones which forced themselves to the heart, “I am deeply grieved to hear such words of faint-heartedness and cowardice from your lips.”

Already she was moved by a feeling of shame ; but she had suffered so much during this long day of torture that his peaceful manner only added a new sting to her sorrow.

“Oh, I well know that to you this faint-heartedness is strange and hardly conceivable,” she answered, bitterly. “Your deportment this morning gave one sufficient evidence of that. And that is what I wanted to ask you ! Was no other course open to you than this ? Was it you—only you, who could give the church’s blessing to my marriage ?”

“It is not I who have given this blessing, Elfriede,

but God. That I was His instrument in going through the customary forms was an accident, or a decree of God from which I could not escape. And would it have been better if I had declined. Should we not be all the more thankful for the wisdom of the Ruler of all, who has given us strength to overcome all our inward conflicts. He alone knows our inward struggles. And I think He has imposed this upon us, in order that upon the grave of foolish hopes, the flowers of purity and peace may bloom."

Elfriede supported herself against the stone pillar. Her hot, tearless eyes glanced down over the still, slumbering valley, whose darkness and quiet presented such a contrast to the glitter and the music behind her.

"Is that not a picture of my life?" she asked, sadly. "Behind me lies all the happiness and peace of my existence; before me the darkness and the silence of a churchyard."

"No, not a churchyard, Elfriede, but the peace of a blessed abode adorned with fruit and flowers, the quiet of a heart which has found peace in the consciousness of duty fulfilled. The doubts and alarms from within will soon be silenced, and you will leave behind, with rejoicing, this emptiness of head and heart which now encompasses you. Over this dark valley the sun in a few hours will shine again, and will with countless miracles manifest the spirit of love, and no written words will be engraved so deeply as his writing on the leaves of the book of nature. You, also, Elfriede, must find your future in this spirit of love! Strive, therefore, to make others happy, for you may be certain that there is no other way than this in which to find your own happiness!"

The rancor and bitterness melted from the young

wife's heart under the intensity and warmth of his words. She turned to him and held out her hand.

“Have patience with me ; I have this day almost lost myself. But I now know the way I should go, and I—I will seek it.”

Just at this moment a single rocket shot up into the starless night, a long, bright stream which rose suddenly and then vanished into the empty air. The noise and flash of light came so suddenly upon Elfriede that she involuntarily drew closer to Werner from sheer fright. There were many doors and windows opening upon the balcony, and through these the wedding guests came hastily out, crying : “The fireworks are beginning—the fireworks !” And in the moment's excitement none of the company noticed the couple who had been standing there alone. The first one who had stepped out upon the balcony had, however, not been so unobservant, and that was the Baron von Hardenegg. He stepped almost fiercely up to his wife and seized her hand with a brutal hold.

“When you wish to gossip with your friend,” he whispered, “there is plenty of room in the salon ! Let this be the last time I ever see you alone with him ; mark me well ! the last time !”

Chairs had been brought out to them and he drew her down by his side. And now the brilliant lights in their many gay colors burst upon them from all sides, illuminating the entire heavens with gorgeous coloring and then fading and leaving behind them that darkness which by contrast seemed denser than ever.

The gay company upon the balcony greeted the pyrotechnic display with shouts of delight and surprise. But she in whose honor all this noisy magnificence was displayed, sat pale and sad with compressed lips by the side of her newly wedded husband. A dark cloud was

moving slowly towards the castle ; the merry throng took no note of it, but to the young bride the oppressiveness became almost unbearable.

But this feeling of oppression lay within her breast, and did not disappear as the parti-colored lights went out.

CHAPTER IX.

The wax candles were burming low, and the sultriness of the room in which Baron Hartmuth von Rhoden and his friend Kurt von Hardenegg were sitting, was rendered more oppressive by the thick cigar smoke which penetrated its every corner. The clocks had struck their midnight chimes two hours before, and as Rhoden poured the last drop of wine from the decanter he said, yawning :

“Haven't we had enough for to-night, my dear Kurt?” while Hardenegg, who sat opposite him, at the card table, began to shuffle the cards again. “I dare say it is not exactly the thing for me to suggest quitting, for fortune has certainly been on my side. But to-morrow's another day and you can take your revenge then.”

The Baron threw the cards on the table, and struck a little silver drum-shaped gong which stood near him.

“As you will!” he said. “This continued ill-luck does begin to weary me. But if you have no objection we will have a quarter of an hour's talk—Bring us a bottle of Rauenthaler, Heitman, and then you can go to bed.”

Until the old servant's return the two friends were silent. Rhoden leaned back comfortably in his chair and looked at the golden arabesques of the ceiling. Hardenegg blew thick clouds of smoke from his lips, knit his brows and looked straight ahead. He had changed perceptibly in appearance in the four years which lay between this night and his wedding-day. He was still a very handsome and a very aristocratic looking man; but his figure was getting a little too corpulent, and his face was becoming flabby. Strange lines were visible in it, doubtless the result of many nights spent in just such a manner as the one now drawing to a close. Baron Rhoden had not altered, and did not look a day older than the hour in which he first met Marguerite Stiller. Nature had provided him with a happy constitution which had enabled him to conquer even the greatest exertions and maddest excesses, and he enjoyed the reputation of being the most foolhardy, adventurous and untiring carouser of his circle of acquaintances.

Heitman brought in the ordered wine. His old face looked very troubled as he set the bottle down before his master.

"Have you any further orders, Herr Baron?" he asked, in such a depressed tone that Hardenegg turned round and looked at him astonished.

"No! But why do you speak so sorrowfully? Are you ill? or are you concealing some love affair?"

"I am not sick, Sir, and the time for love affairs has long since gone by for me. But there are sorrows and sufferings of other kinds, and even an old servant feels it at times, when he has not the right to speak out unless he is questioned."

"And you think I'll be fool enough to question you?" interrupted Hardenegg, impatiently. "As if I

didn't know long ago what an old prattler you were. You are dismissed for to-night !”

The old man obeyed the imperious motion of his master's hand and left the room ; as he closed the door he muttered, shaking his head : “ Like his father—like his father. It began just like this before all the troubles came.”

The master refilled his glass again. His hands were growing a little unsteady.

“ I verily believe that childish old man would like to read me a sermon,” he said. “ An old heirloom like that is an awful nuisance. Servants of this kind become with time very insolent.”

“ You ought to deliver him up to the hangman,” advised Rhoden. “ I had a horse-breaker once whose capabilities had been expended for me a thousand times ; but one day the churl saw fit to assume the tone of mentor, so I struck him in the face with my riding whip and pitched him out of the stables.”

“ Who knows but I should have done something like that long ago. But Heitman is, I am sorry to say, a declared favorite of my wife—But speaking of your jockey reminds me that our North German Derby comes off in eight days. How do the chances stand for Sierstorpff's ‘ Eglantine ’ ?”

Rhoden sipped his wine slowly before he replied, shrugging his shoulders : “ Bad ! Count Vischering's ‘ Kla Bauterman ’ has surprised every one with the way he has come out. I am forced by necessity to stand by no horse unless I am confident it will win.”

“ Do you know, Hartmuth, that that is very bad news for me ? I hope with all my heart that for once at least your sharp glance deceives you ; for I've put up a large sum on ‘ Eglantine.’ ”

“ Have you indeed ! And so long beforehand, too.

Don't take it amiss, my dear boy, but that's a foolhardiness of which I have never been guilty."

Hardenegg stroked his beard. The furrows in his brow had become deeper than ever.

"Well, it's past help now! I bet when I had been drinking heavily, after that last run at Happegarten, when 'Eglantine' came in so far ahead, much to my sorrow. The chances were as favorable as possible then, and it would be the worst possible luck if I was fooled by the devilish beast a second time."

"All we can do is to hope for the best, although for my part I think you'll surely lose—Henderson is going to ride 'Kla Bauterman,' and if you are not able to buy him off with a hundred double crowns he will win."

There was a short silence. Then Hardenegg broke his fresh/ lit cigar in two, and threw it down.

"Wretched tobacco in these last years 'Gracias!' They taste to me like poison! As to all this about the 'Eglantine,' you may not be right, Hartmuth, you can't really tell. Such a calamity would throw me into very serious embarrassment."

"Ah!" came in surprised tones from Rhoden's lips. "It pleases you to jest, my friend. Into serious embarrassment—you?"

Hardenegg had risen. He paced the room a couple of times, and then opened the door in order to convince himself that Heitmann had surely gone, then he turned back to his friend and took a chair close by his side.

"You have not misunderstood me; but of course it is a matter of only momentary depression. But for the past few days, since you have been my guest, I have wished to speak to you on the subject. You are my best friend and the only one in whom I can place implicit confidence."

“You require no assurance that I am at your disposal, heart and soul.”

“You can well understand that the whole matter is painful to me; consequently, you’ll spare me long explanations. My estates bring me in a considerable income, for they are altogether unencumbered. But this income has, during the last year, not been sufficient to cover my expenses. You know the reason. Since this passion for sport has seized me I seem to have been followed by unexampled ill-luck. You’d be astonished if I were to tell you the amount I had lost by betting. Of my other losses at the gaming table I will not speak. They are comparatively small, but they mount up to a large sum, after all. The resources which are usually at my disposal I have already utilized, and the obligations under which I am placed to you in view of my repeated losses, I am not at present able to discharge. My bank account is exhausted. In order to raise the required money, I must mortgage some of my landed property for a good, round sum.”

“If the sum is not altogether too large, perhaps you will allow me to lend it to you?”

“This friendly offer deserves my warmest thanks; but I need, in order to free myself from my present obligations, at least two hundred thousand marks.”

“Ah! that is much more than I could place at your disposal.”

“As a loan without sufficient security—certainly! I had no thought of demanding such a thing from you. But I am in a very delicate position. I must positively have the money, and should be willing to place a mortgage on Buchwald, if—”

“Well, there is no difficulty in doing that. With your property entirely free from debt, you could place

a million on it if you wished. The sum in question is not large, and the interest is no great matter."

"True enough, the amount is not so great if the mortgage could be effected without anything further. But that is, unfortunately, impossible."

"Impossible? are you, then, not absolute master over your own property?"

"Not quite. All the landed property is in the name of the Baron Botho von Hardenegg, my father's almost forgotten brother. I can neither sell nor hypothecate it, until the statute of limitation has run out, and that time is too far distant for me to wait."

Baron Rhoden was lost in thought. In his dark eyes was again that keen, avaricious look which had once reminded Marguerite of a bird of prey.

"That's a surprising piece of news," he said. "Are you quite confident, my dear Kurt, that the long lost uncle will not appear on the scene some day, and demand back his own property?"

The question was certainly natural and apropos; but Hardenegg thought fit to assume an injured air.

"Do you believe that I would have touched a penny of the income had there been such a possibility? I have received circumstantial intelligence of his death long years ago."

"So much the better. I must certainly agree with you that your present situation is an extremely unpleasant one. And the worst of it is that there seems no chance, I am sorry to say, of my helping you out of it."

"I have placed all my hopes on you, Hartmuth. You can readily understand that I do not feel inclined to take any one else into my confidence."

"Certainly. But the sum is too large. And besides, I can not always do what my inclination would dictate. I have certain considerations to regard concerning my

brothers and sisters, and—in short, dear friend, no matter how willing I am, there is nothing I can do to assist you.”

Hardenegg sprang up and began anew his uneasy wanderings about the room. Every line of his face which the past year's mad career had made seemed to deepen perceptibly, his breath came quickly, and the deep flush on his face faded to yellowish white. For many minutes no sound was heard but the echo of his footsteps and the tick-tack from the pendulum of the high case-clock.

“Heaven alone knows what will be the end of it all,” Kurt said at last. “I'll go into the city to-morrow and make the rounds of the usurers and money lenders.”

“Permit me one more question, Kurt. Have you certain and undeniable proof of your uncle's death?”

“Proof which the court would recognize—no!”

“And upon what are your convictions grounded?”

“Upon the story of a man who was with my uncle when he died, and upon the more than obvious probability, that he would long since have announced himself had he been in the land of the living.”

“Well, I would advise you not to go the rounds among the Jews as yet. You would only have trouble with the vagabonds, without gaining anything. And it doesn't seem to me exactly the thing to let the condition of affairs become public gossip.”

The Baron's answer had an angry sound.

“Your advice is good as well as cheap. I have often given myself the same; but the drowning man seizes the nearest board hoping he may yet be landed high and dry.”

Again there was an oppressive pause; Rhoden's glittering eyes followed his friend steadily, and Hardenegg's excitement was becoming greater every moment.

“The matter comes nearer home to me than you imagine, my dear Kurt. And in order to prove it I’ll make a proposition to you which may perhaps open a way for us.”

Hardenegg halted in his walk. And a gleam of hope passed over his face.

“I’ll agree in advance to all you can ask for, Hartmuth.”

“All I have to ask is whether in this case your authority can reach as far as your good will—perhaps it is not quite unknown to you that I have a little weakness for your beautiful sister-in-law?”

“Yes, I have noticed it. But you have no thought of marrying her?”

“Oh, yes, I have thought of it. You know I haven’t much sympathy with this class-prejudice nonsense and other twaddle. I am rich enough to be independent, and I would not be turned from my course by anyone, even if it pleased me to make a chambermaid the Baroness von Rhoden. The difficulty is on the other side. Fräulein Marguerite does not seem inclined to honor me with her favor.”

“Have you made her a proposal?”

“Not exactly; I want to become better acquainted with the lie of the land, before I lay myself open to the danger of a refusal. But the overtures which I have occasionally made were quite as intelligible as the answers which I received in return. Your wife, I regret to say, has never admitted me to her friendship, and I have reason to think that it is she who has rather prejudiced her sister against me.”

“You must be in error, Hartmuth. But—forgive me for interrupting you—what connection has all this with my affairs?”

“A very serious one. I could answer to my brothers

and sisters for granting a loan, even without any apparent security, to my brother, which I would be forced to refuse, no matter how hard it would be, my dearest friend ”

Slowly and with oppressive distinctness he had uttered every word. The color had come back in Hardenegg's face. Who could tell whether it was passion or shame which had forced the deep red into his cheeks?

“Indeed !” he said, doubtfully. “This is a turn for which I was certainly unprepared. Our old friendship must be my excuse for not taking it as a personal humiliation. For the time being let us leave my affairs entirely out of the question. I cannot render you any assistance and I am in some measure surprised. Have you really considered carefully all the consequences of so significant a step? It would seem to you wondrous strange if I made any attempt to dissuade you, but I would do nothing in the world which would place me under the shadow of a suspicion of going into a scheme which perhaps might not be for the best for you, just for my own self-interest.”

“Why shouldn't it be for the best for me? Are you not happily married yourself?”

“Oh, certainly, one would call it a happy marriage. But truthfully, I should have decided differently had it been possible to have this four years experience come before my marriage.”

Rhoden smiled somewhat maliciously.

“You began with a mistake, my dear boy. You should have separated this unconscionable old man from them, in the beginning. In his own atelier under a city roof, he may have struck you as an original, but in a respectable house he is simply a laughing stock. But you need not be uneasy on my account. Up to the

present time I have been prepared for whatsoever might happen."

"And are you anxious to settle this affair at once?"

"No need to rush the matter. We can wait at least until after the races; a little delay won't matter much to you, I suppose?"

Hardenegg bit his lips.

"I must beg you, Hartmuth, to keep this affair altogether separate from my matters. I have detained you for more than an hour with my babble. Now I feel dead tired."

He waved his guest to take precedence as they went through the oppressive, dimly lighted apartment. When they were shaking hands for the night at the door, Rhoden remarked, incidentally: "It might be to your advantage to go to Berlin in order to meet Count Bassewitz. He'll appear in the race course with two full-blooded English stallions. You are old acquaintances, and, if I am not mistaken, there was some talk at one time of a marriage between you and the Countess Hertha."

"Possibly. I believe my mother had some such idea."

"And you disdained the Count's daughter in order to follow the dictates of your heart. The blessed Countess Bassewitz will not forgive you to the day of her death. I remember well how spitefully she spoke of your marriage whenever she had an opportunity. But it matters little to the Countess Hertha, for to-day she has a train of brilliant suitors."

Hardenegg heard him with perceptible uneasiness. This did not seem to be a theme to allay his excitement.

"She must be very beautiful now," he said. "When I last saw her she was but a child."

"Oh, she has a glittering beauty such as I have never seen before. Truly, Kurt, if you had not made so for-

tunate a choice yourself, I should say you had acted most foolishly."

"Good-night, Hartmuth," was the Baron's only answer, and he turned away hastily, as if to avoid farther conversation on the subject. Rhoden looked after him, while a mocking smile overspread his sharply cut features. The comfortable manner in which he stroked his beard and the glitter in his eye were witnesses to the fact that he had no reason to be discontented with that night's work.

Hardenegg's brows were dark and knit as he sought his sleeping chamber, which was separated from his wife's by only a small dressing-room. To his money troubles, which had lain like a mountain on his breast for the past week, were now added new and unpleasant sensations. He believed implicitly in the sincerity of Rhoden's friendship, but the stipulation which he had made as the price of his monetary assistance, troubled Hardenegg greatly. And he had been made all the more uncomfortable by the Baron's last words concerning Countess Hertha. Her lovely face still lived in his memory, and through the night's deep stillness which encompassed the sleeping household, he seemed to hear the whisper of a mocking voice: "She would have been yours with all her beauty and all her wealth if you had so willed it. What folly took possession of you that you scorned her?"

CHAPTER X.

When the family assembled for breakfast at the Castle next morning, Hardenegg looked unrefreshed and irritable. He complained of headache, and looking at the deep rims under his eyes, one could well believe it.

Rhoden was, on the contrary, fresh and buoyant as usual. He led the conversation with wit and zest, and was polite in a hundred little ways to his hostess and her sister. His respectful attentions made little impression, however, upon Marguerite Stiller, and as for his hostess, she paid him no more regard than the duties of politeness forced upon her.

Elfriede could to-day still pass as the more beautiful of the two sisters. Her figure had become a trifle fuller, and her face, notwithstanding its earnest expression, had fulfilled the promise of her early youth. In the natural dignity of her bearing and the unaffected grace of her movements, there was the same captivating charm which had attracted Baron von Hardenegg that bright summer day long ago. Marguerite was a contrast to her sister in being the embodiment of hilarity and naïveté. Her beauty was not of so regular and classic a kind as Elfriede's, but the youthfulness of her actions and the charming smile which played roguishly about her pouting lips, made her appear unusually fascinating. Her manner of receiving Baron von Rhoden's attentions seemed not to have changed since the day on which she first met him. She would redden or look down attentively at something before her whenever those dark, passionate eyes, with their intense expression, were directed toward her. But she gave herself up, notwith-

standing, to the power of his personality and the attractiveness of his lively and interesting conversation.

"I hope that you have not forgotten, Fräulein Marguerite," he said, "that you promised to take a ride with me this morning. I declare beforehand that I will not accept any excuse this time."

The young girl hesitated before answering, and looked irresolutely at her sister.

"You will be obliged to intercede for me, Baron von Rhoden. I do not know whether my sister will agree to our going or not."

"Would it not in truth be better for you to renounce this pleasure, dear Marguerite?" said Elfriede, before the Baron had time to speak again. "You are not enough at home in the saddle to venture any distance without danger."

"If Rhoden accompanies her there need be no talk of danger," broke in Hardenegg, and his words had a sharp and decided sound. "You see your sister doesn't wish to be deprived of this pleasure, and doubtless gives you little thanks for your needless anxiety."

A slight flush rose to the young wife's cheeks, but she turned to her husband with no expression of annoyance, but rather with a friendly petition in her glance.

"I would be much better satisfied if you would accompany them. I am certain that otherwise my father will be much concerned."

"I? O no—O no! I beg you, don't take me into consideration at all."

In great haste and with unmistakable uneasiness the historical painter had spoken in his own defence. It was evident that he felt the greatest discomfort that his name had been dragged into the conversation. As soon as it was possible for him to do so, he left the table and went to the open window, and as the bright sunlight fell

upon his face and gray hair, one realized how old and haggard he had grown in these four short years. Now, as he glanced stealthily from one to another he saw that the appeal to himself had not been noticed.

"I have no time to-day," was Hardenegg's gruff reply to his wife's request. "And besides, it would be altogether unnecessary. Heitmann, see that the 'Fox' and the 'Lady' are saddled at once for Baron Rhoden and Fräulein Marguerite."

After the old servant had retired to give the order, there was a pause in the conversation. Hardenegg's curt manner of dismissing his wife's request had left a painful impression upon them all. Marguerite was the first to break the silence, hoping to dispel the after-effect of her brother-in-law's brusqueness. She had risen from her seat and was now leaning on her sister's chair while she whispered, as she softly kissed her cheek: "You are not angry with me, are you, dear Elfriede? Nothing will happen to me, and I promise you that I will be as cautious as possible."

Elfriede smiled kindly upon her, although it was evident that her lips quivered. Then Marguerite slipped out of the room to prepare herself for the ride, and a few minutes later Rhoden followed her example. Scarcely had the door closed when Hardenegg pushed his chair back roughly and sprang up, saying, angrily: "Your behavior is inexplicable to me at times, Elfriede. Cannot you see that Rhoden might be annoyed by your foolish opposition? He is one of the best riders in the whole country."

"I have no doubt of it, but it was much less the care for Marguerite's bodily welfare, than considerations of another nature which made me oppose the ride. I find that the Baron is not the best company in the world for my sister."

She spoke quietly and in a soft, rather than a bitter tone. Yet there was a sound of fearless determination in her words which irritated her ill-humored husband more than ever.

“And what have you against him, if I may ask? Has he been guilty of any discourtesy towards either you or your sister? Or are you so little in sympathy with him merely because he is my friend?”

“Certainly not the latter, Kurt. Although I can freely say I wish that he was not your friend.”

He laughed mockingly.

“Ah! You would perhaps like to direct my choice in regard to my associates? Truly, there is a certain humor in that. What are your reasons?”

“As they would signify nothing to you, there is no necessity for my giving them.”

“None whatever! But I cannot permit you to neglect the duties which the demands of hospitality have laid upon you. Remember, I do not wish Rhoden to have any further occasion to complain of your unfriendly bearing.”

“So far as I know, I have paid him every attention which I owed him. But I am in no condition, neither have I the desire, to simulate a regard which I do not feel.”

She had scarcely ever before met her husband with such quiet decision as on this morning, when he could ill-brook any resistance whatever. While he had control enough over himself to remain quietly leaning against the mantel, his eyes flashed forth an angry fire, as he looked at the beautiful, earnest face before him.

“You appear to forget, my dear Elfriede, that in certain matters, not so much your wishes as mine are to be considered. When I invite a guest to my house,

whom I designate as my dearest friend, I am justified in expecting that you will not alone treat him with ordinary politeness, but with all the amiability and friendliness of which you are mistress. This may cost some exertion, which is to be deplored. But in any case, I command you not to let my friend notice that anything is lacking. I believe that in this particular I have set you an example of sacrifice by no means inconsiderable, and permit me to say that you will do well not to cause me to regret my self-abnegation."

This was said slowly and with a full calculation of its effect, and it was just this unmistakable, premeditated purpose which made it so painful for Elfriede to bear. And the old man in the window drew himself together as though he had received some bodily injury; anxiously and breathlessly he glanced at his daughter. He knew his son-in-law's ugly words could only be directed towards himself, and he feared that she would give an angry answer on his account. But their conversation was interrupted by a servant's entrance with a letter for the Baron. Hardenegg changed color slightly as he saw the superscription. He went to the window as though he desired to peruse the missive without observation, and after a lapse of several minutes he turned back toward his wife again. The frown in his forehead had not disappeared, however, and the contraction of his eye-brows indicated a high state of excitement.

"A great piece of news, Elfriede," he said. "My mother informs me that I may look for her return in the near future."

The young wife rose quickly. A joyful expression broke over her whole face.

"So she has become reconciled at last. She has forgiven you for—"

Hardenegg interrupted her at once. "My Mother is not well, and seems to have some presentiment of death and so wants to come home. She has at least written to me that she desires to close her eyes forever on the spot where she passed the happiest days of her life. At all events we may assume that she has accepted our marriage as an unalterable fact. It will assuredly take all your powers to make the reconciliation complete."

"It shall certainly be no fault of mind if I fail, Kurt," responded Elfriede, timidly, while his unkind manner forced the tears into her eyes. But Hardenegg appeared too much concerned about other matters to notice her agitation.

"You will, of course, have to manifest some self-denial when she comes," he continued, as he paced the room restlessly. "My Mother has been undisputed mistress here too long for us to expect her to take a secondary place. It will be best for us all to remind her as little as possible of the changes which have taken place in her absence."

He glanced toward his father-in-law, who sat dumb with bent head and troubled face.

"And we must set about making some indispensable changes at once. It is above all necessary that the little garden salon should be restored to its former condition."

Now the painter lifted his gray head with a start.

"My studio?" he asked, half anxiously and half reprovingly. "And where shall I go with my unfinished pictures?"

Hardenegg shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"My God! Can't you find a suitable room somewhere? In the back part of the castle or in the right wing—"

The old man shook his gray head sadly.

“You remember, dear son, that the garden salon is the only large room with proper arrangements for light and shade. I had attempted painting in several others before I decided on that, you know.”

“Well, I am very sorry, but I really cannot help you. My Mother often sat in that room during the day, and she would consider it a great lack of attention if she found it in its present disorderly condition. Her claims here are undoubtedly the oldest, and I cannot make her the victim of your fancies.”

The old man stared at him with wide open eyes. A little gleam of the old fire which had once flashed from his eyes seemed now to glimmer in them.

“A fancy? You call my art a fancy?”

“Well, what good is there in wasting time over a few empty words or idle compliments? Haven't you opportunities enough to hunt or fish or do half a dozen other things to kill time? Must it be ever and always this unprofitable painting?”

He only sought some cause to show his anger, for Stiller had certainly not given him the slightest reason for such an attack. Elfriede stepped to her father's side as though she would shield him from farther insult, and she looked steadily into Hardenegg's flushed face. Stiller did not appear to have quite comprehended the cruel speech.

“What do you say, dear son? You are surely not in earnest. You call my paintings unprofitable? And yet it is scarcely three years since the picture which I sent to the Berlin Exhibition was sold the very first day. Even you said at the time that it was an extraordinary circumstance.”

The Baron laughed spitefully.

“Kurt!” said Elfriede, pleadingly. But every word

which she uttered to-day seemed but to arouse him to farther anger.

“An extraordinary circumstance—indeed!” said he, in hard, cold tones. “So extraordinary that it can never be repeated. My means are not sufficient to enable me to enact such a farce often.”

“Your means?” The old man asked the question with wide, staring eyes, and his bearing was that of a person whose senses had been blunted by fright. “You were the purchaser—you?”

“Certainly! Who else would it be? There would have been some difficulty in finding any other, I fancy.”

The gray headed painter rose suddenly. The look of troubled timidity had left his face, and in its place was an expression of pride which had received a deadly insult.

“And why, my son, why did you do this?”

“If you are too innocent to discover my motives, you should at least not compel me to disclose them.”

“But I will hear them. I have a right to learn what they are. Why did you buy the picture, and why did you keep it a secret?”

“Because I did not wish my name to be held up to public ridicule. Because I did not wish every journeyman tailor in the land to make merry over the Baroness von Hardenegg’s father. And while we are talking on this subject, my worthy Herr Stiller, we may as well come to a clear understanding on another matter. I cannot, I am sorry to say, forbid you to paint or to place your pictures on exhibition, you will do that at your own discretion. But the changes which my Mother’s return necessitates will force me for the future to have less patience on another point than I have had in the past. Since you have resided at Buchwald the place has become by degrees an artists’ club-house. We have

indeed had much pleasure in receiving some of your friends, but I cannot conceal the fact that their actions do not always convey the idea that their surroundings and manner of life are such as we are accustomed to here. So long as no one was disturbed by it I could afford to look on silently. In the face of my Mother's approaching return it will be my duty to call your attention to this subject, in order that there may be no repetition of such visits in the future. It would not be agreeable to me to have my Mother find those prognostications confirmed, which were indeed the cause of our estrangement at the time of my marriage."

Hardenegg had not attempted to weaken the force of his hurtful words by any friendly manner. He had spoken in cold, haughty tones without the least excitement, and his voice had assumed in the last sentence a sharp and an almost embittered, spiteful tone

Elfriede, who had become deadly pale, was about to answer him; but her father interrupted. He laid his trembling hand imploringly on her arm, and drawing a long breath he said, without looking at Hardenegg: "Frau von Hardenegg shall never be annoyed by me, nor by my plebeian friends, I can assure you, my son-in-law. And you can make the alterations in the studio as soon as you choose. My pictures will disgrace you no longer."

His energy of a moment since and the appearance of manly pride had all disappeared now. With sunken head he moved towards the door, evidently anxious to prevent Elfriede from accompanying him.

"Let me go, dear child. Let me go," he begged. "I am only going to take my accustomed walk."

Then the married pair were left alone. The Baron had stepped to the window and was looking attentively at the two riding horses which the groom was leading

up and down the drive. He turned round apparently surprised when Elfriede spoke to him ; but his affected surprise quickly became a reality when he noticed the changed expression in her face. Her flashing eyes and drawn lips gave to her whole countenance an energy and force which he for the first time perceived.

“You have in this hour forfeited every right to confront me with your name and your noble birth. You have broken your promise most disgracefully to this old man, and your actions toward him since our marriage have been altogether unworthy of a nobleman. I will say to you that I shall expect from you the fulfillment of certain duties the like of which I shall discharge. That respect which is a parent’s due from a child, and which I shall give your mother, I shall also demand from you for my father ; and I claim it as my right that you should be mindful of the promises you made him when we were betrothed.”

The angry color mounted into his cheeks, and he would undoubtedly have given her a violent answer had not Marguerite entered the room at that minute in her riding habit to take leave of her sister. While she was chatting gaily with his wife he left the apartment.

His haughty, cold look left it uncertain whether he intended having any further conversation with Elfriede on the subject or not. Whether he felt that in this instance he was in the wrong, or whether he was too proud to justify himself against any accusation from her lips, could not be learned from his face.

CHAPTER XI.

Balthasar Stiller left the castle with weary heart and with heavy, slow steps. He did not respond to the greeting of a servant whom he passed, and it was just as well he took no notice, for he would have perceived the man's disrespectful manner and mocking grin. Servants are never so keen as in respect to their masters' temper, whether it be gracious or ungracious, towards a third person, and among the servants at Buchwald, from cellar to attic it had long been an open secret, that the father of their gracious mistress was not held in high esteem by the Baron. No one was much surprised at it, for the old man had not won their respect, and from the first day of his presence there he had been a subject for jest in the servants' hall. The witty cook had called him an "addleheaded idiot" and this bit of choice humor had been taken up by the little circle and never been forgotten.

Many sad truths had come home to the poor old man very early in his new life. In a few weeks all his gaiety and joy seemed to vanish, and he became a silent, intimidated man, whose only care was to bury himself in the loneliness of his atelier, and who avoided no other company so anxiously as that of his son-in-law. Now and then one of his old-time friends sought him out, to have a smoke and chat, as they wandered through the castle grounds; then something of his old-time spirit of fun and railery would return to him, but even at such times he had an anxious, suspicious looking countenance as though he feared he might even be debarred these harmless strolls.

“If our old mistress was here,” the servants whispered significantly, “he wouldn’t remain an hour in the house.”

And in this assumption they were about correct. In the face of his mother’s immediate return it became evident to the Baron that Stiller’s presence was greatly to be deplored; and no one knowing the old Baroness von Hardenegg could have doubted that she would resent it; but the Baron had this morning struck his father-in-law a heavy, prostrating blow, from which, with his lack of strength, he could never again recover.

He took the shortest cut across the magnificent park to one of the gates of exit, walking as rapidly as his trembling limbs would permit. He looked neither to the right nor to the left, and from time to time unintelligible, disjointed words came from his lips.

The morning was cool, but the fever of excitement within him seemed to burn with an overwhelming fire, and as he passed the lodge gate he took off his broad, felt hat. He had taken a few steps into the wood which surrounded the park when he turned suddenly as though he had made a mistake.

“Not here,” he muttered, “not on his ground.”

One could see him from the glittering windows of the castle as he made his way slowly and with halting step along the narrow meadow path which led up to the thickly wooded heights beyond.

This far-reaching, dark forest was the property of the crown, and Balthasar Stiller could enjoy its majestic beauties without feeling that even this walk was a galling benefit received from his son-in-law. He could, at least, take some satisfaction in choosing this steep and wearisome way. When he found himself at last within the deep-shaded woods, he sank down upon a moss-covered stone, in order to recover from his exhaustion. As far as eye could reach, the restful, peaceful valley lay

beneath him. When he had first seen it four years ago, brilliant with the glory of the setting sun, he had been in ecstasies, and had thrown up his hat with an unrestrained cry of joy at the sight of this earthly paradise. And now—after this short time—he longed for his bare, unadorned atelier again, and the outlook from the poor attic over the city roofs with their high chimneys and wretched sweeps would have been more attractive to him than all this luxuriant magnificence, upon which he, a troublesome intruder, could never more have any claim. And he cursed it all from the bottom of his soul, because he saw in it the cause of all his misery. With a deep groan he covered his face with his hands. Just then he heard the step of a man approaching through the underbrush and breaking the fallen branches as he trod on them. He glanced up hastily, and did not in his bewilderment respond at once to the greeting of the tall, young man who was passing near him. He was dressed like a head-forester, but Stiller did not remember ever having seen him before, and he was not in the humor to worry his head about the stranger. Rising with an exertion, he went at hap-hazard deeper into the forest. This moment's disturbance had affected him unpleasantly, for he wished to be alone, quite alone, with his nameless sorrow. How heavily his former, inconceivable blindness and infatuation lay upon his soul this morning. Oh, that he had been able to foresee all this on that day when the brilliant young officer had deluded him with promises which he might have known were too surprising and too extravagant ever to be fulfilled. And now was he not getting his well deserved punishment for his foolish credulity and reprehensible conceit? Truly, he had not known the world and his childlike trust had been his undoing. He had indeed believed that the happiness which had appeared so suddenly

before his eyes, and in such an attractive form, would last forever ; but it was of his child's happiness that he thought most ; he had certainly never intended that his loved one should become the victim of a sacrifice for mere riches, instigated by any selfish longing of his own.

And now this supposed happiness had proved itself to be only a frenzied delusion. True, the glittering exterior was the same, but a miserable skeleton was hidden away in the background. Yes, he knew long ago that Elfriede was not happy, no matter how bravely she tried to hide her sorrows from his eyes. Hardenegg's undisguised indifference and his, at times, rough conduct towards his young wife, together with his frivolous and dissipated manner of life, had been no secret to his father-in-law ; and it grieved him still more when he observed Elfriede's silence and submission, and realized with horror and shame the part he had taken in bringing upon her this sorrow. He it was who had been the author of all her trouble ; it was for his sake she had made the marriage, and for that very reason she would not confide in him. He would not have felt that her life was made miserable had he not seen it clearly written in her face, but now he was reproaching himself continually for the sorrow which her eyes could not hide. To-day he was so humiliated and ashamed that he felt he never dare look his daughter in the eyes again. The deep silence which surrounded him had no soothing effect ; but as he brooded over these last years he grew more despondent and desperate. Without noticing whither he went, he plunged still deeper into the forest, unmindful of the thorny underbrush which caught in his hair and cut his hands. On he went, deeper, and still deeper into the thick wood, as if he would escape from some unseen enemy, and with the half-unconscious desire to put miles between himself and that haunting grief

which was always in waiting for him within the walls of Buchwald.

It was one of nature's barricades which finally brought him to a halt. Between the tree trunks he saw a dark, glistening body of water. In another moment he stood breathless with quick beating heart on the edge of a quiet little lake surrounded on all sides by the dark woods. This deadly sheet of water was unlike the usual woodland lake, and had for the past hundred years been called the "Black Lake." Stiller had seldom come this way before, but now he remembered that it played a ghastly rôle in all the tales and legends which the folk of that region related. Its depths had never been ascertained, and no living thing had ever been seen beneath its smooth, glittering surface. Its dark waters were also said to possess both magical and poisonous qualities.

Stiller threw himself down on the steep bank, and resting his chin in his hands stared long and fixedly at the silent, mysterious waters beneath him. The thoughts which had overwhelmed him as he had rushed through these woods now forced new and almost frightful fancies upon him. Had not fate led him to this place, to this bottomless sea which never gave up its dead? Was not all sorrow and humiliation ended with one stroke, if he only had the courage to take this one little step which would bring to him deliverance and peace? After the morning's bitter reflections and disillusion, he had nothing to expect or to look forward to in life. Perhaps this was the only service of love which he was able to render his daughter. Now when he recognized, in its entirety, how deep was the aversion which Hardenegg felt for him, the conviction forced itself upon him more and more, that he was the cause of the estrangement between Elfriede and her husband, and that with his death all barriers

would be broken down, and for the future their life would be one of happiness and complete accord.

The dark waters bewitched the old man, and his hot, dull eyes seemed fascinated by their sorcery. It was as if some unseen power compelled him to seek beneath the silent bosom of the lake the place of eternal and undisturbed peace. Under these sombre waves he might slumber on in peace, until the coming of that great day when there would be no longer any distinction between the high and the low, the rich and the poor. Doubtless his body would never be found, and no one would ever know in what manner he had disappeared forever from earthly view. There would be no burial service at his open grave, no tears, no lamentations; that was what he would wish, and it took from him all horror of his purpose. He was useless and burdensome, and it seemed fitting that he should slip quietly from a world in which there was for him no place. If there were no room for him to pursue his beloved art in the ancestral halls of the Hardeneggs, surely there would be no place for his poor body in their family vaults. He would not run the risk of further reproof at Buchwald—where henceforth even his very friends would be excluded—no, but he would prove to this arrogant noble that there was no further need of his benefactions.

Balthasar Stiller rose and took a few steps down the bank. There was one spot where the ground stretched a little distance out into the water, and on this little point stood an immense fir tree which had been growing there a hundred years or more. The dark fragrant branches moved gently to and fro in the air as they bent forward over the water's edge, and perhaps when the autumn storms came again would disappear forever beneath its surface.

Here was the best place to make the final plunge. A little spring from one of these knarled, far reaching branches and all was over. The buzzard circling far above would be the only witness to this piteous tragedy. Without delay he climbed out as far as he could on one of the old branches. Then he glanced around with glittering, insane-looking eyes. There was nothing to prevent the fulfilment of his design, nothing to keep him in this sorrowful world. In his bitter melancholy he thought no other place could have been so well suited for this purpose of self-destruction—unattractive, silent and dark—a fitting spot from which to enter the great unknown. Suddenly from the depth of the wood there came to him the sound like the whistle of a bird. Involuntarily he turned toward the place from which the sound came, but in doing so he lost his balance. Instinctively he clutched the heavy limb of the tree, but his hand found nothing to which he could hold, and with a cry he fell into the waters beneath.

The loud sound of the splashing waters, as the body fell, echoed through the silent woods. The waters parted for a moment and then rushed together again like ocean waves, and with such eager rapidity that it did in truth seem as if they would hide forever all trace of the gray head which had but a second before disappeared.

CHAPTER XII.

A few minutes after Herr Stiller had entered the woods, Rhoden and Marguerite rode slowly down the sandy carriage road which skirted the edge of them. The Baron, with his well proportioned graceful figure, sat his magnificent horse as he alone knew how to do, and looked both handsome and distinguished, while Marguerite's bearing showed that she kept her seat in the saddle with no such feeling of security as a skilled rider should possess. In spite of this she appeared to enjoy her ride. Her cheeks were highly flushed, her eyes were sparkling, and with gay laughter she answered the joking sallies of her cavalier. Two large mastiffs, the Baron's special favorites who always accompanied him on his rides, ran and jumped and played around them.

At the edge of the wood, Rhoden drew his rein. "It is so lovely here," he said. "And I know a very romantic way through the forest."

With loud bark and clamor the dogs rushed in and out among the trees. The Baron had to whistle repeatedly to call them back to him, for the forest scent made the hot blooded animals long for a little chase of their own.

And it was their continued yelping which attracted the attention of a third person to the riders. The man who had greeted Balthasar Stiller so courteously, and was now coming from the depth of the forest, had struck the same path as Rhoden; but when he saw the Baron an expression of intense repugnance was noticeable on his open, handsome countenance.

“ This has at length become unendurable ! I will have to prove to this Baron that he must have some respect for the law.”

He raised his fine double barreled gun ready for use, and stepped out from the underbrush full in view of those approaching, and caught Rhoden unawares. Now, for the first time, he saw that the Baron was not alone. At this discovery the young man pressed his lips more tightly together and the wrinkles between his brown eyes became deeper. With the attentiveness of quiet anger his eye followed the young maiden, and noticed with what courtesy Rhoden treated her ; how he held her bridle and directed the horse's course, and how in breaking off branches and holding them back for her, he would almost unconsciously, it seemed, stroke her hair. Of this Marguerite herself was scarcely conscious. It did not, however, escape the eyes of the unseen witness, and his drawn lips proved that to him the sight was absolutely painful. He must now change his former purpose, and he threw his gun again over his shoulder as the dogs came barking up to him.

Rhoden had now caught sight of him and was instantly aware of the uncomfortable predicament in which he was placed, for he turned to Marguerite and said, in a low tone : “ Do not be frightened, Fräulein Marguerite, if you should become the witness of a rather dramatic scene. We—particularly the dogs—are trespassing upon forbidden ground. And that king's head-forester yonder is such a new hand in his important office, that he—as Hardenegg says—has the presumption of his class, and gets his back up at nothing. I am quite curious to see whether he will make a show of his new dignity for me or not.”

He turned his horse so that it headed directly toward the place where the officer was standing. Marguerite

had followed the direction of his glance while he was yet speaking sneeringly of the man, and discovered that he was no other than the one with whom she had been compelled to refuse to dance on the day of her sister's wedding. She had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with him then ; and had never seen him once in the four years which had elapsed since then. When she recognized in the youthful, manly, head-forester the Inspector Reinach, the insignificant circumstance of the long forgotten dance came back to her mind with full force.

And she did not strive to conceal the fact that the surprise was a pleasurable one. Giving her horse rein she was by Reinach's side almost as soon as Rhoden. Smiling she nodded to him, evidently ready to respond to any word of greeting which she might receive. Rhoden's half-whispered words of a moment before appeared to her now only a joke, and if she attached any significance whatever to them, it was so little that she had no thought of treating the irritated officer in any other manner than as a pleasant acquaintance. But the smile quickly disappeared from her face when she saw that Reinach had no thought of answering her expectations. She had the consciousness, however, that he must have recognized her, for he looked her full in the face with a clear and earnest glance ; but his greeting was cold and formal, only such as the barest civility required, and even to this she was too astonished and confused to respond. As she rode past him the deep color mounted to her cheeks, and the hot tears forced themselves again to her eyes, as on the wedding evening. But she struggled to keep them back, for this time she was conscious of no wrong doing, and if this forester had not forgiven a little fashionable deception of years past, why, he could do his own pleasure. There was

certainly no occasion for her to trouble herself further over his unfriendly attitude.

She, of course, did not see what had occurred behind her, and she would have looked in vain for the dramatic scene which Rhoden had prophesied. Not a word was exchanged between the two men. The Baron had not taken his eyes off Marguerite's face. Neither had her sunny smile escaped him, nor the sudden rush of color to her cheeks. Whether he put the correct construction or not upon all this, could not be discovered from his manner. With a mocking smile and a glance of unspeakable enmity toward Reinach, he forced his horse as near as possible toward the head-forester. It seemed as if the officer's threatening glance was all that restrained the wise animal from obeying, as implicitly as usual, the direction given by his master's rein. And this glance did not seem without its effect even upon Rhoden.

At any rate he felt enough impressed by the silent command to whistle his dogs, who were still yelping through the forest, back to him at once.

The head-forester looked after the riders for a few seconds, and then turned back in the direction from which he had come. He went along a narrow deer-path almost covered with underbrush, until he came to a point where a sheet of water showed plainly between the trees. Soon the still, dark lake became more distinct, and he was on the point of turning aside, to take another path still deeper in the wood, when he heard a strange sound not unlike a man's deep groan, and halted to listen more attentively, for he felt he could not be far from the spot from whence the sound had come. He took a few hurried steps to a slight elevation from which he could gain a view of part of the "haunted" lake. And what he now saw overwhelmed him with

surprise and apprehension. Gray-haired Balthasar Stiller, with whose singular appearance he had long been familiar, was climbing out on the knarled branch of a fir tree which overshadowed the water, and from his wild look there could be scarcely any doubt as to his object. He recognized at the same time that it would be at least two minutes before he could reach him. If he could only succeed in some way in making him delay his suicidal plunge, he might reach him in time to prevent the execution of his insane design. But if he called to him his voice would probably have an opposite effect, so he only gave a shrill whistle.

That the result of his good intentions did not answer his expectations was surely not his fault. Balthasar Stiller was attracted by the whistle, but his hasty turn lost him his narrow foothold. Reinach heard his cry, and saw his fall into the water. While he gave no credence to the peasants' idle tales, still he was well aware that this was an ugly sheet of water. He knew that all the danger lay at its bottom, where the thick mass of slimy growths might hold the body, and that it would be a much more dangerous undertaking to rescue a man who had fallen in this still lake, than one who had been plunged into a swift, flowing river. But notwithstanding all this, he lost no time in tearing his way through the wood and underbrush, and reached the shore only a few seconds after Stiller's fall. The great circles were yet forming, and the dark water still splashing, but this time it put to shame the old legends of its pitilessness; for before the old painter had lost consciousness he felt himself seized by the back and pulled energetically from the water; and almost before he could realize what had befallen him, he had been rescued from a watery grave and laid upon the bank, with the blue heavens above him and the branches of

the very tree which had had for him such an insane fascination, drooping over him and greeting him as one just returned from the land of shadows.

Reinach would have busied himself to make the old man more comfortable, but Stiller made a motion of dissent and exerted himself with all his returning strength to rise to a sitting posture.

“An unlucky accident—” he stammered. “I was just botanizing a little ; I have you to thank for saving my life, my dear sir, and I—I—”

“Pray do not exert yourself, Herr Stiller,” the other interrupted, quietly, for he saw that the poor old man was weary and breathless. “I noticed that you were in search of plants, or something of the sort. Fortunately, my house is not far distant, and I trust you will soon, with my assistance, be in a condition to get to it.”

“It is certainly very friendly of you to do all this for me, sir. And you yourself noticed that I—that I—”

“That you have to thank your lack of caution for this unwilling bath—of course,” said Reinach, in confident, reassuring tones. “If that black lake was half as bad as its name you would never have seen Buchwald again.”

A shiver went through the old man's frame as though he was struck with the fever. He stared into the dark water with her calm, leaden surface, and he could not conceive that he ever had had the courage to seek for peace and rest beneath it. Before Reinach could come to his aid he was on his feet again.

“I am ready—I am ready,” he said, evidently anxious to turn his back upon this unearthly spot. “If you will give me your arm, I trust I shall be able to go a half mile or even further.”

It was only the head forester's strength which enabled them to accomplish their journey, for after a few steps

Balthasar Stiller's body began to sway, and Reinach put his arm around him and half supported, half carried him forward, until they saw the gates and little tower of the attractive, modern looking forestry which Reinach occupied.

A quarter of an hour later, Herr Stiller, relieved of his wet clothing, and well wrapped in blankets, lay upon the sofa in Reinach's comfortable, simply-furnished living room. His body had been warmed and revived by a drink which his rescuer had brought to him and insisted on his swallowing. Then he had been left alone and ordered to sleep, but the nervous tension and excitement of the last few hours drove all sleep from his eyes. He fell gradually into a happy, half-unconscious, dreamy state, with a sense of comfort which he had not enjoyed since the day he left his attic home in the city. Here there was no luxury and scarcely a single embellishment. But in everything there breathed the spirit of perfect order and silent contentment, which he had never found in the sumptuous apartments in Castle Buchwald. And through the high windows the thick, branching forest trees, with their fresh, pungent odors, caught the sunlight, and softened and subdued it ere its beams penetrated into the pleasant little room.

"It is good to be here." That was the single thought that possessed the tortured soul of the old painter in this hour. He listened to the monotonous ticking of the pendulum which swung to and fro in the old-fashioned black wooden clock, and the longing came over him to live for all future time in this forest retreat, and bury himself in the peaceful woodland loneliness.

Then the door was opened softly and the head-forester's clear grave eyes were looking at him.

"You are a disobedient invalid, my dear Herr Stiller," he said, pleasantly, as he took his short pipe from his

mouth and entered the room. "Did I not enjoin you, as your physician, to take a sound sleep?"

His listener nodded to him and stretched out his hand toward him.

"Heaven reward you for your goodness to an old fool," he said. "And now tell me, if you please, whether you are a man of flesh and bone or the guardian spirit of this forest? It all seems to me like a fairy vision."

"Ah, but the fairy visions come to us but seldom in our waking moments. I am most assuredly the guardian of these woods, but there is little of the shadowy spirit about me. I have the honor to present myself to you as the Head-Forester Reinach."

"So—so! and how, if I may ask, did you learn my name?"

"Four years ago I was your son-in-law's guest at Buchwald at the time of your daughter's marriage."

The mention of Hardenegg was the first bitter drop in the historical painter's cup, since he had entered this house. He sighed and turned his face towards the wall. Reinach need be no sorcerer to discover that something had occurred at Castle Buchwald to disturb the family peace. So he hastened to relieve the painful silence.

"Your daughter must be anxious concerning your absence," he continued, "so I have just sent a messenger to acquaint her with your whereabouts, and to request a carriage to be sent for you. It is unfortunate that I have none which I could place at your disposal."

Balthasar Stiller turned toward him frightened.

"You have sent to Buchwald?" he asked, hastily. "And Herr von Hardenegg will learn what has become of me?"

"I addressed my note to Fräulein Marguerite Stiller, and I said a slight accident had occurred, owing to a

mis-step ; some explanation was necessary to account for your wet clothing. Perhaps your younger daughter will not think it incumbent on her to worry her sister by repeating what I have written."

He did not add, that he had requested her in his short, polite, but curt note, to say nothing about it. But Balthasar Stiller was acute enough to recognize this stranger's tender feeling, and deeply touched and full of thankfulness, he seized his hands.

"I shall never be able to repay you—never ; but surely I shall not forget it. No, no, let me speak," as Reinach attempted to silence him. "I cannot trust any one in the whole world, and I should be sorry to have you form a bad opinion of me. But believe me, my young friend, when a man of my age, who throughout his long life has passed through many sad hours is driven to such straits, he must be hard pressed. He should not be condemned too hastily—no, no, that would be a great injustice."

"Do I look like one who would be inclined to condemn a fellow creature so lightly ? and that, too, when he is an old man whose gray hairs should be respected ? No, no, my dear Herr Stiller, you can in this instance rest entirely satisfied, and I beg you, from my heart, not to think there is any necessity to exculpate yourself in my eyes, for there is certainly no need for explanation in regard to what you will undoubtedly, sooner or later, regret. I sincerely trust that the grounds for your momentary depression of spirits will soon become things of the past."

In Reinach's manner there was a quiet, manly straightforwardness which had an impressive effect upon the weak nature of the old painter. A feeling of security and safety came over him in the presence of this self-reliant, young man which was very grateful to him, but made him feel all the more fearful at the thought of so

soon leaving him. Suddenly an inspiration seemed to come to him, and he turned with childish confidence to his host.

“You have saved me from that cursed water, but you can do more for me than that, if you feel disposed to show me a little friendship or sympathy. Is there any little room in this house which I could call my own, and to which I could at times escape for quiet and loneliness. You do not know how miserable a man is who has no such quiet corner to which he can escape. And here—here it is so delightful I wish I need never leave it.”

Over the forester's sun-burned face passed an expression which showed he was deeply moved.

‘The house will be open to you at any hour, Herr Stiller,’ he said, cordially, “and if you would like to paint here, in peace and quiet, I have a well-lighted room on the ground floor, which I have occasionally used for the same purpose and which is at your disposal.”

Stiller would undoubtedly have risen to thank and embrace his host, had not a knock on the door brought their conversation abruptly to an end. A servant made an announcement in a low tone to Reinach, and the latter left the room hurriedly.

An elegant, light landau from Buchwald stood in front of the house and its occupant had just sprung out of it. A deep color overspread her lovely countenance as the head-forester came out to meet her. A shy glance met his earnest face as he advanced, and obliterated from his mind for the moment all memory of the father who must be shielded from suspicions concerning his accident at the lake.

“I have followed your directions without delay,” said Marguerite, in a clear, ringing voice, “and I hope you

were honest in writing me there that was no occasion for anxiety on my father's account."

"There was not the slightest reason for concern, Fräulein. Only his clothes were wet, and as mine would not fit him, it was impossible for him to return at once to Buchwald. But will you not do me the honor to come into the house for a short time?"

His words were very polite, but just as cold and formal as his greeting of the morning in the woods. And Marguerite, who did not, of course, know how much thanks she owed this man standing opposite her, felt a great inclination to assume the defensive against him.

"I will remain here until my father is ready to return home," she replied. "Will you kindly show the servant where to find him, for we have brought him a change of clothing."

The head-forester motioned to a lad in his service, to show the Buchwald valet where to find Herr Stiller. To Marguerite's surprise, and a little, perhaps, to her annoyance also, Reinach made no attempt to leave his place by the carriage.

"How did the accident happen to my poor father?" she asked, without looking at him, for Reinach had shown no inclination to continue the conversation. "I cannot understand how he came to stray so far away from the park where he generally walks."

"I am not able to give you any information about it, Fräulein, but it does not seem to me at all strange. The royal forest has evidently a great attraction for others at Buchwald, also. The Baron von Rhoden places himself in a position, day after day, to suffer a heavy penalty."

Marguerite laughed. "A heavy penalty! Do you

think then that a fine of a few thalers would be a severe punishment for him?"

"That was not exactly my meaning; but I do not think the Baron would be altogether indifferent if either myself, or one of my officers, should shoot his magnificent hounds."

"What? Shoot? No, you are not in earnest! Even if such a barbarous law existed, you would surely not be capable of injuring such innocent animals who are, withal, so wise and constant?"

"I should do it on the dogs' account with a heavy heart; but I have above everything the duty of my office to fulfil, and Herr von Rhoden knows the regulations very well. He has paid no attention to a warning which I sent him several days ago; perhaps it will make a deeper impression upon him if you tell him that the next time he takes his dogs through the forest over which I have control they will surely lose their lives."

"Ah, that is shameful!" cried Marguerite; "the perpetrator of such a deed would be little better than a murderer!"

The bearded lips of her listener were drawn a little, but Marguerite did not rightly read their compression, and imagined he was scarcely concealing a scornful smile; she began to have a feeling of real antipathy toward this haughty and heartless man.

"I shall have to ask you to find another than myself to make this communication to Baron von Rhoden," she continued, "and it would have simplified matters greatly if you had had the courage to acquaint the Baron with your purpose when you met him face to face."

Both manner and words showed plainly that she considered him cowardly, but Reinach did not see fit to resent her insulting remark. He made the irritated girl a polite, perhaps an ironical bow, and then casting his

eyes towards the house, said : " Ah, here is your father ! You see he is all right."

Marguerite looked on in surprise as her father parted so cordially from his new friend. And this parting would have been of much longer continuance, had not Reinach released himself forcibly from the old man's embraces and returned into the house.

His parting greeting to Marguerite was nothing more than a cool, distant bow which the girl felt more keenly than any unfriendly word he could have spoken. As he disappeared in his pretty, picturesque home, the feeling that by her thoughtless brusqueness she had perhaps made an enemy of a man whose friendship she would have craved, came over her with a painful, depressing sensation.

With close attention and deep interest she listened to her father's explanation of his slip from the tree bough, and the head-forester's bravery, and the risk he ran in coming to his rescue. As Balthasar Stiller continued his tale, her color changed from pale to red and from red to pale, and she inwardly bemoaned the fate which had made her late conversation end so unpleasantly. Of one thing she was convinced, he had a deep and unconquerable aversion for herself. And it was with a heavy heart that she resolved that for the future she would try to be more circumspect.

CHAPTER XIII.

Castle Buchwald was all excitement and bustle, and the servants ran hither and thither, preparing the long neglected rooms of the Baron's mother, for that dame's reception. Hardenegg himself superintended much of the work and bestowed both time and attention upon the most trifling details. He acted as a very dutiful and thoughtful son should do, who was anxious for the comfort and pleasure of the home returning parent, and he seemed, in the fulfilment of this child's duty, to have a certain jealous feeling that he might be deprived of his rights. When Elfriede gave any order in regard to the appointments or adornment of a room, he immediately interfered and gave contrary directions, declaring that he knew best his mother's wishes and desires.

The young wife silently conformed to his wishes without manifesting any of that annoyance which would have been excusable under existing circumstances. Her father's atelier, his only retreat, had been the first room sacrificed in this revolution of affairs. He had scarcely been given time to remove his belongings, and a servant had bundled them together in a small, upper room, in which it was needless for him to think of continuing his artistic labors. But he had witnessed it all with a tranquillity which was in marked contrast to his former excitement. Thanks to the head-forester, Elfriede had heard nothing about the accident at the lake, but had she heard it, she would not have been deceived as to her father's desperate motive in going there ; and the secret fear with which she had, for some time, regarded his actions after every stormy scene, had been allayed in

some measure by his mildness. In his acquiescence she read no other explanation than that his reason had told him that submission to the inevitable was his only course. Neither she nor any of the others at the castle noticed that he spent little of his time within its walls these days, but would sally forth early in the morning with a great roll or portfolio under his arm and disappear in the thickly wooded park beyond. Nor did any one suspect that the forester's lad was in waiting in the thicket to relieve him of his heavy package and lead the way for him through the crown forests. Balthasar Stiller felt that he had achieved much when he had removed all his artist's belongings to the new studio at the head-forester's. The success of his plan and his ability to accomplish it all without his son-in-law's knowledge was a great satisfaction to him. In his mind he had already designed a new picture; and he had fully decided in his heart that this new creation should be his masterpiece, for he would make it his vindication and his revenge. If he could make his daughter's husband acknowledge, that the spark of genius which nature had implanted in his breast was of as much value as a noble escutcheon, or even a princely fortune, then Hardenegg would be compelled to retract his vain boastings and come to him with humble apologies. And the price which he should receive for this great picture he would give over to the Baron von Hardenegg, and then he would once more feel a free, unshackled man, who could command the unqualified respect of his fellows.

So dreamed Balthasar Stiller, and his air-castles towered so high in the heavens, that he, gazing at their dizzy heights, forgot all the vexations and humiliations of the daily life to which he was subjected.

Two days before the arrival of the dowager Baroness, Baron von Rhoden departed. The great races of the year were soon to come off, and he was so much interested, and had so much at stake, that he wished to be on the ground, and go over the course with his own racers, at least, a few days before the important event. In the meantime there had been no change in his friendly intercourse with Marguerite Stiller. He had made no declaration, neither had Hardenegg and he held any further nocturnal conversations on the delicate subject.

“I will see you at the races?” he had said to his host as they shook hands at parting, and Hardenegg had responded with peculiar emphasis :

“Certainly. It is unpleasant for me to have to leave my mother on the first day after her return, but you know that I must, at least, be at the North German Derby.”

“Very good—so farewell until then. I hope we’ll be successful in our ventures.”

The Baron nodded to him with a somewhat bitter smile, and as he turned back to Buchwald he sighed deeply, as if his heart were heavy within him.

The old Baroness was to be received like a princess, and the pompous preparations were in great contrast to the quiet coming of the pale-faced bride and her family, the night before the wedding, four years before. The Baron and his wife went to the station to meet her in a carriage drawn by four horses. He had donned his uniform, which he never wore now except on the Emperor’s birthday ; and the servants’ liveries, and the trappings of the horses glittered like gold and silver in

the sunlight. Elfriede had arrayed herself in her most costly toilette, but it was too simple to suit her husband, and he looked at her with a mocking, displeased expression not to be misunderstood.

He evidently made an effort to have his temper correspond with the joyful preparations, but, for all that, he was taciturn, easily irritated, and full of a nervous unrest. At short intervals he would glance at his watch, and his whole bearing was that of a man who wished that an unavoidable unpleasantness was well over. Of his wife, who in this trying hour needed his friendly assurances and loving support, he never for one moment thought. Silent, he sat by her side during their cheerless ride, and when they reached the station, he descended hastily from his seat, leaving the footman to assist her to alight.

Elfriede was pale, but her beautiful face showed neither fear nor unusual excitement. With quiet self-possession she followed her husband into the little waiting room which Hardenegg paced restlessly during the few minutes which elapsed before the arrival of the train. When the signal bell finally sounded, he put his helmet hastily back upon his head, and as he gave his wife his arm she heard him murmur half-aloud, 'At last!' The train was now visible as it rounded an edge of the wood, and a few seconds later the locomotive came puffing and snorting into the little station. The station master, aware of the aristocratic personage who was expected by this train, hurried to open the door of the first class coupé, and Hardenegg, whose face had suddenly grown a deep red, followed after him immediately.

"Welcome, a hearty welcome, dearest Mamma!" he cried, hastily, as the tall figure of his mother descended

from the compartment. "Let me thank you a thousand times for your amiable decision!"

Without a word of reply, Frau von Hardenegg received his tender embraces. She bore herself with the same aristocratic dignity and hauteur as on the day when she had last seen her son at Buchwald; and if the lines in her face had deepened a little within the last four years, she certainly showed no signs of any fatal illness. And never had that cold, aristocratic looking countenance seemed more severe in expression than at the moment when Elfriede stepped up to her, and bent over to kiss the slender, white hand.

"I scarcely expected that you would take the trouble to come," sounded the low trained voice in hard and icy tones in answer to her daughter-in-law's few words of greeting. "You must pardon an old woman for disturbing, for a short time, your family circle, because she wishes to die in her former home and in the arms of her son."

She took Hardenegg's arm and brushed past Elfriede, into whose cheeks the blood had rushed painfully. If the young wife had had any idea that her husband's mother was returning home with a heart full of love, and with a desire for reconciliation and peace, surely these first few words dispelled forever all such foolish illusions. The very sound of her voice and the icy stare which accompanied her words left no doubt as to her unalterable enmity towards her son's wife. Hardenegg must unquestionably have known it too, as he stood a dumb witness to this meeting between mother and wife. But he made no attempt to mend matters by any word of mediation, or to shield Elfriede in any way from the mortification and humiliation which she was forced to feel. He considered it his duty to treat his mother with all consideration and attention, but the picture of the

future which came into the young wife's soul at this moment, was not tinted with very brilliant colors.

Much more painful than their drive to the station, was the return journey to Elfriede. Hardenegg strove to appear calm and collected, and at the same time very jubilant over his mother's return. He assured her over and over again that she would not find Buchwald changed in the least, and how happy he would be if she would only forget the stretch of time between her departure and her home coming.

Frau von Hardenegg listened with a bitter smile, and finally interrupted his storm of words with the sharp, clear-toned observation: "Why should we trouble ourselves to use such fine phrases, my son? How could I possibly ever forget that of which I shall be reminded every hour of the day. I can well believe that you earnestly long for my comfort; but, unfortunately, we human beings cannot, when startling changes occur, act as though nothing had happened, and my only endeavor will be to acquiesce and submit in silence."

And as she spoke these words, fraught with resignation and sorrow, her face showed that she had returned ready for battle, for a hard, merciless contest, which would only end with her own overthrow, or with the total annihilation of her adversary. That this adversary was no other than the beautiful young wife of her son, who sat by her side, pale and silent, there could be no doubt; and yet the Baron saw no occasion to give his wife an encouraging glance or a friendly pressure of the hand, or in any way to let her know that in the hour of her need she could rely upon his love, or look to him for support.

In front of the great portals of the Castle all the attendants and servants had assembled, and as the carriage halted, Marguerite and Balthasar Stiller appeared.

If Hardenegg could have found any excuse for banishing his father-in-law, he would surely have taken advantage of it, but as none offered, he thought it would perhaps be better after all, to have this meeting over in the first hour, as it was one of the inevitables anyway. And nothing escaped the former mistress of Buchwald in this the first hour of her return. With a slight, proud bow she acknowledged the greetings of the servants, and when Hardenegg presented Herr Stiller and Marguerite to her, in the vestibule, she gave the singular looking old man a surprised, stony stare, and reached Marguerite the tips of her fingers, as she turned away without speaking a word to either of them. The servants, as they withdrew, gave one another significant and smiling glances. They understood that this reception of the old historical painter was but the beginning of the end; and with that quiet love of wrong doing and mischief, which is the natural belonging of little souls, they waited impatiently for the revolution to come.

“Where are you going to put me?” she asked of her son, with hypocritical shyness. “If you have chosen some quiet corner for me, it will be all the better. I am only a sick old woman, and it would perhaps have been kinder to spare me some of these exciting spectacles.”

She expressed neither joy nor thankfulness at her son's solicitude for her comfort in the arrangement and adornment of her rooms. She took it all as a matter of course, or else she seemed perfectly indifferent to what had been done for her; only a very keen observer could have noticed the triumphant expression which crossed her countenance as she cast a lightning glance around her apartments. Before the Baron left her, he informed her that he had invited a few persons in the neighborhood to dine with the newly returned mistress—he laid

particular stress upon the last word. The dowager acknowledged her son's communication with a tired bow.

"I submit myself to all your arrangements," she said. "You and your wife are the ones to give orders here."

The company which assembled at dinner an hour later in the great dining-salon was numerous enough; but a glance was sufficient to tell that they did not belong to that aristocratic circle into which their host had been born. Some of the noble names in the vicinity were represented, but the best families had held themselves aloof since Hardenegg's *mésalliance*, and the *bürger* element exceeded by far those of noble birth. Most of them were unknown to the old Baroness, and she took her place with a manner which showed that her son's social deterioration had not escaped her. Among those who were honored by an introduction to her was John Werner, the pastor of Frauensee. His calm, quiet face and the impressive manliness and dignity of his whole appearance made some slight impression upon the haughty woman, and something like a gleam of friendliness shone in her face.

"You are the successor of our poor Valentine, of whose death I read in the papers, are you not?" she asked. "Your predecessor had won for himself a warm place in my esteem. He was a true, devoted friend to our house."

Perhaps she expected that Werner would assure her of his own devotion to her noble house, and her eyebrows contracted a little when he simply answered that he, too, had considered Pastor Valentine a man worthy of all respect and of pure and blameless character.

"His office was none too easy," continued Frau von

Hardenegg, "and I presume you have the same sad experiences that frequently fell to his lot. The people of Frauensee, and the region round about, are, in the main, a rough and wild rabble."

The clear, gray eyes of the young clergyman expressed both disapproval and astonishment as he looked at the arrogant speaker.

"I have never observed anything of the kind, Frau von Hardenegg," he said, quietly; "so long as one does not forget that all men have their faults, one will not discover anything worse here than in any other corner of the world. And I cannot believe that my predecessor passed so hard a sentence upon his little flock. The sad truth must have come to him, that poverty and distress are fruitful springs of weakness, both in body and soul, and he must assuredly have been more inclined to pity and condone the errors and hopeless misery of these poor people than to condemn them."

While he was speaking so earnestly his listener's face had assumed its hardest and coldest expression.

"I thank you, Herr Pastor, for your friendly if altogether unsolicited information," she responded. "It is evident that you are so filled with Christian toleration, that you regard all the knaves and drunkards of your community with delight, and are filled with joy on their account. The worthy Herr Valentine did not look at it so lightly."

Without giving him an opportunity for explanation or defence, she turned her back upon him. John Werner sat quietly in his allotted place; but the smile which played about his lips told that he had not been annoyed or excited by her arrogant and insulting words.

Stiffly and uncomfortably the meal went on. It seemed as if every one who came in contact with the host's mother were chilled and paralyzed by an icy

breath which repressed all freedom or mirth. The toast which was given by an old and profligate noble, who had once been a gentleman of the bed-chamber at court, to the return of the "long-absent mistress of the castle," was drunk with as little enthusiasm as bare civility demanded, and when the last course had been served the company arose with an evident feeling of relief.

They dispersed in careless groups upon the balcony and in the adjacent apartments to take their coffee. John Werner had directed his steps to a quiet corner in order to have a talk with Herr Stiller, and the two had been chatting for some time when Elfriede approached them. The Pastor went a step forward to meet her, and the hostess, who had been detained until now at her husband's side, shook hands cordially with him. Though she bravely concealed from the world all traces of the tortures through which she had that day passed, the penetrating eye of her friend could read in her face something of what she had endured. She did not attempt to force any deceptive smile to her lips, for she felt that for the moment, at least, she was free from espionage.

"I feel almost inclined to be dissatisfied with you," she said, in a low tone. "Did you not know that your out-spoken speech to Frau von Hardenegg would make her your enemy forever?"

"I could not, for conscience sake, avoid defending those, upon whom so heartless and unjust a sentence had been passed. It was necessary to express my earnest disapproval of such words coming from the mouth of a woman who is not guiltless of blame concerning both the bodily and spiritual sorrow so rife in this region. I have heard from many reliable sources that the late Baron, who spent with a free hand and kept open house

for his associates, was never moved by any tale of distress, and did absolutely nothing to alleviate the sufferings of the poor, neighboring peasants; in fact, he directed his overseers and agents to be both hard and cruel to his tenantry, and showed no clemency, no matter how harrowing their tale. His memory is not revered, and near and far his wife is held in as little esteem as was he."

"Of course you spoke from your knowledge and according to your convictions, and yet, notwithstanding all, I wish from the depths of my soul, that conversation had never taken place. Ultimately, I will have to suffer for it all."

"You, Elfriede, who were not concerned in it at all! And why you?"

"Because any intercourse with you will be looked upon with new distrust, or indeed with open hostility. Because the last joy and the last comfort which has sustained me may be taken from me. My husband has forbidden any intercourse with you from the first, but he has, so far, borne with patience my infringement of his commands. Now he will undoubtedly do whatever his mother wishes or thinks fitting. And a voice in my heart tells me that there will be no toleration of our old friendship, nor of my charitable work in the parish."

Werner looked down thoughtfully as she ceased speaking. The possibility of such a consequence seemed to trouble and alarm him. But he had himself in better training, with much stronger self-command, than the poor little wife before him.

"If all should happen as you prognosticate, Elfriede," he said, after a short pause, "we must submit, and I know that in obeying the commands of duty there are far greater sacrifices made than this."

"Everything seems so easy for you, John, as if the

bare memory of the blessed words 'Thou must' reached to the innermost recesses, and made the intolerable bearable. On my wedding day I gave you the right to scold me for being weak and of little courage; but since that day I have truly never bemoaned my fate to you. You have heard neither sighs nor complaints from my lips, and no matter how hard it has at times seemed, I have always comforted myself with the consciousness that I have fulfilled every duty. But I will not boast of a strength which I do not possess. I need some staff to support me, some consolation and encouragement. And this consolation, as you well know, was our united, humane work. If this is taken from me, I have no longer any surety for myself. It may seem wicked and unchristian for me to be so despairing; but it is certainly not Christian to lay upon the weak more burdens than they can bear."

In this outpouring of her over-burdened heart she had forgotten the circumspection which she had observed at the beginning of her conversation with her old friend. Her manner had become excited and her voice had grown louder, and she shrank with evident affright when, just as she ceased speaking, a cold, haughty voice close beside her said :

"Believe me, my dear Herr Chamberlain, as soon as a single stone of the foundation of an old house is removed, all is irretrievably lost, and a glorious race, which for hundreds of years has striven for glory and shone in honor passes away forever."

Frau von Hardenegg, leaning on the arm of the old nobleman, passed in front of her daughter-in-law as she finished speaking. Whether or not she had heard any part of the conversation between her son's wife and the village pastor, one could not discover from her behavior. She did not turn her head toward them, nor bestow upon

them a single glance. As Elfriede looked after her, an angry light came into her beautiful eyes for the first time.

“Did you hear that?” she said, bitterly. “These words of wisdom were uttered for my benefit rather than to convince the Chamberlain, and I am confident it was done to disturb us.”

“You should be careful to avoid anything that would lead to a collision between you. I think it probable that your mother-in-law feels, on this the first day after her return, a certain motherly jealousy; but that will soon disappear when she learns to value you at your own worth.”

“Oh, never—never! She has not come for peace and reconciliation; she has only come to make me altogether unhappy.”

“Elfriede!” he said, reprovingly, but she had been too deeply wounded that day to heed him.

“Have not you yourself received a proof of her temper and her injustice?” she continued. “Shall she not be more inimical towards me, whom she considers her declared enemy, than towards a poor man against whom she can have absolutely nothing? No, I know what I have to expect from her, and also what she will demand of me; I shall be expected to bow in the dust before her like a slave and to sue for mercy as though I were a criminal, and—but why bother you, you have never in truth been my friend.”

Since the wedding night, when she had stood before him in her bridal gown, Werner had never seen her in such a condition of painful excitement and despair. And the convulsive motion of his hand as he laid it for a second on hers, gave witness to the fact that his heart was not as quiet and peaceful as was his countenance.

“I shall be your friend, Elfriede, while I have breath

to breathe," he said. "You cannot doubt that, and I cannot better prove my friendship than by admonishing you to cultivate resignation and patience. Only one can sustain and stand by you in this crisis, and that is your husband. Upon his heart you must lean, to his love you must turn, and it is impossible that he should deny you any prayer or petition which you utter."

"And what if he does. If I stretch out my hands in hopeless despair and no one in the world extends a supporting arm to me, what shall I do if I cannot count upon you to help me?"

And as she looked at him with the anxious eyes of a beseeching child, she discovered in the depths of those deep, gray eyes a flash of fire which she had never seen in them before. He leaned over towards her as he answered, and it seemed as if his whole soul was in the few words which he spoke.

"If such an hour should ever come, Elfriede, I would sacrifice my life to protect you. But God is all-powerful, and no necessity may ever arise!"

They spoke no more together on that day, and Werner departed, long before the rest of the guests saw fit to make their adieus. What more was there to be said between these two, after the earnest, significant words which had just been spoken!

Later, Kurt von Hardenegg accompanied his mother with courtly politeness to her apartments. This time she did not dismiss him so hastily as she had done earlier in the day. Her voice had assumed a more friendly and milder tone, and in a seeming outburst of motherly love she took his head between her hands and kissed him

tenderly. "My poor son!" she said, sorrowfully; "my poor, dear son!"

The Baron had rather an embarrassed face; such an outward exhibition of affection from his mother was so unusual, that considering the present existing condition of affairs he did not feel quite comfortable.

"Why do you lament over me, Mother?" he asked. "Do you not find all going on about as usual here?"

"I find everything worse, much worse, than my most alarming apprehensions had pictured. What has come upon us, Kurt, that we are obliged to seek the company of such people?"

"You are a little hard on me, Mother! One has to pay his neighbors some little attentions, and they were really all honorable people whom I honored by inviting to dine with you."

"Certainly! Herr Muller and Herr Schulze are most respectable farmers. But where were the Bernsdorff and Hohenfeld families, the Falkenstiens and Sutzorns, those life-long friends of your father's. Where was Count Bassewitz, who, by the purchase of Lankenau, has become your nearest neighbor?"

The Baron pulled his moustaches. He recognized that his mother had an object in discussing this matter of his estrangement from old friends, and he knew there was no possibility of avoiding the painful subject.

"Of course, we both understand that my relations with these families have undergone a certain change, but I cannot say that I think I have lost much."

Frau von Hardenegg was about to make him a hasty answer, but on second thought controlled her natural impulse.

"You are the master of the house, and will choose your guests to suit your pleasure," she answered, in a

faint voice. "For the few days which remain to me on earth, it can make little difference who comes or goes."

"Why do you speak of dying, Mother? I trust you will live many, many years and have a happy existence with us here."

"A happy existence? You are not in earnest? Even if I were in perfect health how could I be happy, when you, my only son, are so miserable!"

"I, Mother? I have, so far as I know, made no such acknowledgment to you."

"In mere words—no. You had not confidence enough in me to do that! But a mother's eyes are sharp and need no outspoken avowals. Look me straight in the eye, Kurt, and then assure me on your honor that this marriage has made you happy."

"Can one be altogether happy on this earth, Mother? Human hopes are seldom entirely fulfilled."

"Such words of resignation from your lips are new to my ears, and I do not scruple to say that from a man in the pride of his strength and youth they are very significant. But all this pains me more than it surprises me. I knew from the beginning that from this romantic love-dream there would come a stern awakening. But I little imagined that on the very first day of my return, I should have to deplore my resolution to come back again."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes, and the Baron's manner showed a growing uneasiness.

"What bitter words, Mother! I believe that I did all that I could to obliterate from your mind any vexing impressions."

"All that was possible—that's true enough! But there are some things over which you have no control, my poor son. It is easy enough to induce a poor girl, attracted by the glitter of your wealth and position to

become your wife, but it is an impossibility for you at the same time to win her love. You can make her the mistress of your father's house, but you cannot force her to yield to that spirit of conjugal obedience and wifely decorum which has ever been a distinguished characteristic of the women of Buchwald."

The Baron's brow contracted sternly.

"Mamma, I understand that you cannot love Elfriede, and I have no thought of demanding from you such a self-sacrifice. The accusations which you have made against my wife in this the first hour of your meeting, before you have learned to know her, prove to me that you have a blind hatred for her which troubles me greatly."

"Ah, that is what I expected. You believe that I am deceiving you—that I complain of my beautiful daughter-in-law because of my deep aversion for her. Had I not felt assured that you also had misgivings as to how matters stood in this house, I should have felt constrained to remain silent."

"What do you mean? Have you reliable grounds for thinking that my wife refuses me obedience, or that any blemish has been cast upon her wifely dignity? If such is the case then it is your duty to speak, and if you have anything to tell, tell it, but I pray you not to confine yourself to vague insinuations."

"No, no. I will not be the one to sow discord between you. Is your love so intense still that it blinds you to the most notorious things? If so, do not seek to discover the truth. Let us say no more on this subject."

But Hardenegg's curiosity, and his suspicions as well, had been aroused, and he insisted on having a full explanation of his mother's vague hints. At last the Baroness said, with a deep sigh: "I have observed your wife as far as I have had the opportunity to-day; not

because I had any wish to spy with malicious intent, but because I wanted to learn for myself whether you were happy in the choice you had made. With deep pain, which finally arose to righteous indignation, I discovered that she did not think it necessary, even on my account, to manifest even a semblance of affection for you. Her own imprudence—I could use a sharper word if she were not your wife, and bore my own name—was sufficient proof that I was not in error. The new pastor has evidently exerted himself greatly to win her heart.”

The Baron sprang up; the veins in his forehead were swollen, and he bit the ends of his moustache savagely.

“The pastor of Frauensee? Do you know of any intercourse between him and Elfriede?”

“Yes. During dinner I noticed the direction which the languishing eyes of your wife took every now and then, and found they were met by longing looks from that sallow faced, pious and somewhat democratic divine. No sixteen-year-old boarding-school girl could have mistaken the object of his adoration and devotion, and I do not doubt that others besides myself perceived this silent conversation of the eyes.”

“You must be mistaken, Mother. You must have deceived yourself. My God, that would be too outrageous!”

“I have not finished yet. After dinner, as I was taking a little promenade on the Lord Chamberlain’s arm, we came unexpectedly to a secluded corner, and surprised the Herr Pastor and your wife in a situation which certainly needs some explanation, for it was surely no accidental conversation. Your wife spoke with a fire and a passion which I should never have imagined was concealed beneath so placid an exterior, and I felt myself reddening when I observed that the Chamberlain had overheard a fragment of this conversation.”

The Baroness told all this in an unusually soft voice, as though almost forced against her will to speak, and her son was in no condition to conceal from her his angry and increasing excitement.

He stepped with impetuous tread to the window, as if anxious to hide from his mother the color which dyed his cheeks. Even she felt a little surprised at the powerful effect of her words.

“So far,” she continued, slowly, “as I could understand, she was suing for some friendly hand to release her from her insupportable situation. Why she made such an appeal, I must leave you to divine! And as we passed, the Lord Chamberlain heard the estimable pastor call your wife by her first name two or three times.”

“Oh, that is outrageous!” interrupted Hardenegg. “And I have been really such a fool as to be imposed upon by such seemingly angelic behavior. Yes, Mother, I believe all you say, for you certainly could not know what I suspected was going on, four years ago. Well! I have been a long time getting my eyes fully opened. This Werner was an old and trusted friend of the Stiller family when I first met them, and at that time I had my suspicions that he was courting Elfriede’s favor. On the day of my marriage, I learned for the first time that he was the Pastor’s assistant at Frauensee, but Elfriede played her part with so much skill, that I thought she was utterly indifferent to him. But on that evening—the evening of our marriage, Mother—I surprised them in earnest conversation, just as you surprised them to-night. They had gone out together on the dark balcony where they would not be overheard, and when I appeared with my guests, they shrank guiltily apart.”

“And you took it all calmly? You did not forbid him your house, and command your wife never to speak to him again?”

“I could not bring myself to believe that Elfriede would ever forget her duty. All that she said and did breathed so much innocence and sincerity of heart, that it always seemed to me that I need have no slightest doubt of her purity. Her feeling for Werner only seemed one of ordinary friendliness. And I had no disposition to debase and humiliate myself in her eyes, by displaying any foolish jealousy.”

“Your delicacy of feeling toward this woman was more, my dear Kurt, than she deserved at your hands. For she evidently values neither you nor your honorable name. I am afraid you will meet with more humiliations in your life’s journey with her, than you now deem possible.”

Hardenegg stamped his feet impetuously on the carpet, and the rush of blood to his head almost blinded him.

“If I thought it was possible that there was in her heart an emotion which belonged to another man—by the eternal God, I would strangle her!”

Frau von Hardenegg did not take her eyes from his face for a moment. She had, from the beginning of this interview, kept one decided, clearly marked object in view, and with her keen insight into human nature, knew just the moment when the axe should be laid at the root.

“That would be as dramatic as it would be foolish,” she said, with the slightest sneer in her voice. “I think, in this case, you can do much better than that.”

The glances of mother and son met. Perhaps the remnant of better nature within him made him doubt his mother’s insinuations and suggestions, but his blood was hot within him, and the low, admonitory voice of reason could obtain no mastery over him.

“And what do you suggest? What must I do to win your approbation?”

“My approbation is of little matter here, Kurt, it is of your own happiness you should think. And as you never can expect to find happiness by the side of a heartless, egotistical creature, you surely owe it to yourself to separate from her on that day when you have proof of her unworthiness.”

“You mean for me to get a divorce, Mother?”

“As a *dernier resort*, if nothing else can be done. The scandal of a dissolution of this ill-judged marriage will be much less, I can assure you, than that which will result from a continuance of her present conduct.”

Some thought of an honorable, peaceful future entered Hardenegg's soul. All that he had suffered during the past four years, the many painful and humiliating consequences of his fatal *mésalliance* forced themselves all at once before his soul. The picture of again winning an unbounded freedom had never before appeared to him so enticing. He breathed heavily and leaned with arms folded over his breast, against the window.

“Before one resorts to extreme measures he must have unquestionable proof of what he asserts,” said he, hesitatingly, as though he felt ashamed to give his thoughts words. “Even what you have seen and heard could be explained away, as innocent and misconstrued.”

Frau von Hardenegg kept herself well in hand ; she felt she had gained much in this last hour.

“Certainly !” she responded. “And be assured, I do not want to force you into taking so severe a measure. I only wish you to keep your eyes open and to permit me to watch with you over the honor of our name.”

The Baron kissed his Mother's hand.

“I know that all that you do, you do for my good, Mother. It would perhaps have been better for us all if I had been more obedient to your wishes.”

He apologized for the necessity of leaving her for the next few days; she gave him a smiling rebuke for deserting her so soon, and he bade her good-night and left her room with the earnest, brooding manner of a man to whom a new thought had suddenly come, and who had at last succeeded after much trouble in seeing a light in the future beyond the far-stretching chaos of the present.

Frau von Hardenegg, who had maintained a gentle demeanor anything but natural to one of her haughty and egotistical temperament, rose hastily, as soon as her son had departed, and rang her bell violently for her maid. The woman appeared promptly; she was a pale, weak-looking creature with uneasy, piercing eyes. She had been in the service of the Baroness long before the old Baron's death, and had accompanied her mistress on her travels during the last four years. She had won a high place in her mistress' esteem, but was thoroughly hated by her associates in the servants' hall.

"I feel utterly exhausted," said the Baroness, "and wish to retire immediately, but before I sleep I want to give you some particular directions."

And these directions must indeed have been of especial importance, for it was two hours later when the maid was dismissed from her mistress' sleeping-room.

CHAPTER XIV.

The operatic and musical season was so long past in the capital, that an isolated musical event of importance was sure to attract universal attention. When it was announced that a great concert was to be given by the Count Ladislaus Hardenstein at his gorgeous palace, every one who was anybody was very anxious to obtain tickets. The object of this concert was to raise money for some charitable institution in the city, and the price of admission was very high ; but the aristocratic character of the whole entertainment spurred many on to make unusual exertions to get cards of admission. There were but few celebrated artists named in the programme, and these were assisted, for the most part, by amateurs who belonged to the oldest and noblest families in the country.

So one can readily understand that this charitable entertainment bore much more the character of a private musicale than of a public concert. The men and women who composed the audience appeared in rich toilettes, and Count Hardenstein, convinced that no unseemly element would dare cross his threshold, was as attentive and courteous as it was in his power to be. The great concert hall, and the adjoining apartments, were brilliantly illuminated. Richly liveried servants served the ladies with choice refreshments, and in one of the largest rooms a buffet had been placed which was loaded with rare wines and delicacies.

Every one was on the *qui vive* for the great event of the evening. A young violinist, who for the past two winters had attracted great attention, both in Paris and

London, by his musical skill, had just arrived in the city and had amiably signified his willingness to accept the Count's invitation and play at his concert. It would be his first appearance in Germany, and after the reputation which had preceded him, it was not surprising that the name of Stillfried Ewald was more frequently whispered among the guests, than that of any other performer of the evening.

Punctually at the appointed hour the guests assembled in the great salon. They greeted one another cordially and with hearty good-will, for they were nearly all acquaintances, who met to-night at the Hardenstein palace, to open their purses for the benefit of the city's afflicted poor. The room was crowded to its utmost, and the distinguished audience presented a wonderfully attractive and fascinating scene.

"Look at that man! He reminds one of Ahasver, the wandering Jew!" whispered the young Prince of Croy to his neighbor, and this comment was whispered through the entire room. Indeed the remark seemed appropriate enough, for the man who had just entered, with his powerful, bony frame, large head, deep set glowing eyes and sharply cut profile, and his long snow-white beard entirely covering his breast, looked like a being from another world, and was in sharp contrast to the fresh, every-day tone of the people around him. Even his odd, old-fashioned attire seemed to bear traditional testimony to the suggestion just hazarded.

As he stood leaning on his crutch, he cast, before he seated himself, an eagle glance over the gay throng, glittering with uniforms and costly bejeweled toilettes, and one could read in his face how little he was impressed by all this shimmer and sheen of wealth.

The astonishment increased as Count Hardenstein approached him, and greeting him with every mark of

attention and courtesy, exchanged a few cordial words with him. From all sides inquiries were now made regarding the interesting unknown, which the host answered willingly as far as he himself knew.

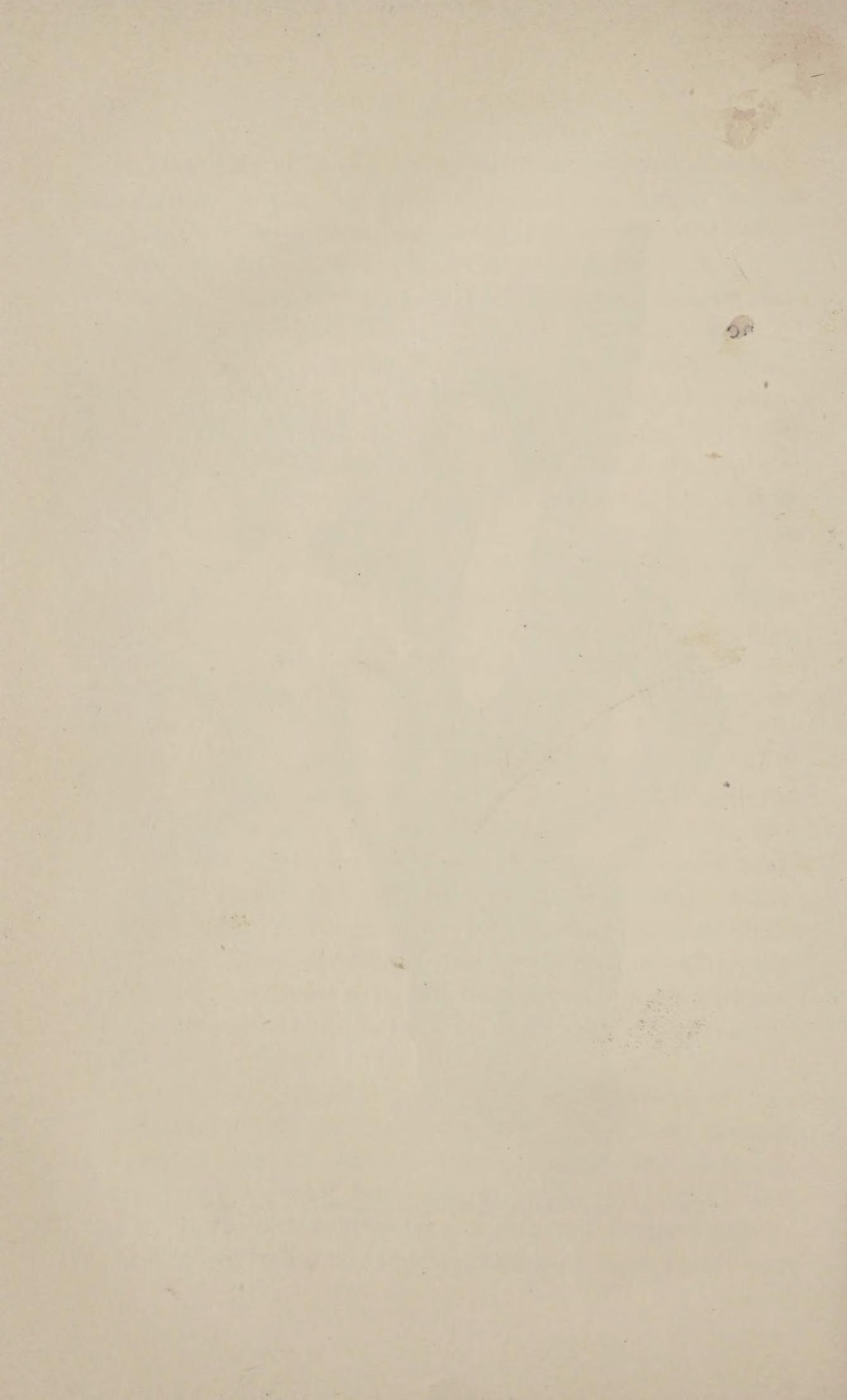
“It is he whom we have to thank for the presence this evening of the brilliant, rising star, Stillfried Ewald. There is evidently a close bond of relationship between the two. The old man is, if I am not mistaken, a Russian. At least, his name is Kostomarow, and that has, unquestionably, a Russian sound. It seems it was he who discovered Ewald’s extraordinary talent, and superintended his musical education, under the most celebrated masters in Paris. And the young man’s gratitude and reverence for his senior is beyond anything I have ever before observed. He does nothing against the will or without the expressed approval of his benefactor, and, in fact, seems to have no other interest or desire.”

All this gossip was listened to with much interest, and the desire to see the young musician was greatly increased, after hearing so much concerning both his patron and himself. The aristocratic amateurs who opened the concert had much to suffer, owing to the scarcely suppressed excitement and impatience of their listeners. They were applauded as heartily as politeness demanded, but not with the warmth which would have been displayed had there been no greater attraction to follow.

At last the eagerly anticipated announcement was made, and the lorgnettes and opera glasses were hastily leveled at the tall, slender youth who stepped upon the stage from a small music-room on the left. He had a finely cut, noble looking face, a tall, well formed figure, dark curling hair and large, speaking eyes, now soft and



"AH, YOU ARE MOCKING ME, COUNTESS HERTHA!"—See Page 211.



sad in their expression, now glowing with energy and fire.

His appearance had won him a partial victory, even before he raised his bow, and the feminine part of the audience was already in ecstasies over his aristocratic and modest demeanor. As he raised his violin, he gave a long, earnest look at Kostomarow; the old man answered it with an encouraging nod which brought a smile to the youth's lips. Then he began to play, and all which had been said in his praise seemed weak and insufficient to mark his power of accentuation, and the masterly manner in which he handled his bow. The first, soft tones of the clear, sweet instrument reached all hearts, and all realized that this violin, in spite of its simple exterior, was a treasure from which the virtuoso could draw rich, soul-stirring strains.

With devout attention the hearers listened to the resonant and mellow tones which Ewald drew forth with his bow, and when he had ended, the storm of applause which burst forth from all parts of the room was almost overwhelming. As Ewald bowed modestly in acknowledgment of their approval, a close observer might have noticed that when he caught sight of his old friend applauding vociferously, and clapping his wrinkled, bony hands, a beam of almost childish glee crossed his face. When he saw that the applause would not cease until he again took up his bow, he played a second piece, a phantasia which gave him a better opportunity to display his great powers than had his first execution. It was indeed a poem in music revealing his wonderful technique, and the deep, inexpressible feeling of a great soul devoted to his art. Very little notice was paid to the remaining numbers on the programme, after Ewald's departure from the stage, and when, later on, the guests wandered through the rooms, or tarried at the buffet

salon, no other subject was discussed than the talent and great future career of this prince of violinists.

After a short time the young virtuoso himself appeared amid the company, by the side of his singular looking, lame protector, and Count Hardenstein had enough to do for the next hour, in acceding to requests for an introduction to the wonderful Herr Ewald whom every one considered it an honor to be permitted to grasp by the hand. The young artist showed, in this distinguished and flattering circle, neither foolish pride nor humble submissiveness. The naïve joy which he felt over his success shone in his eye, but he conducted himself with such frank modesty and manly courage that no one could have denied him both sympathy and admiration. But after a time all this bustle and noise began to make him weary and uncomfortable, and he took the first opportunity which offered to ask Kostomarow in a whisper if it were not time to depart.

But the old man shook his head decidedly.

“You must have a little patience, my son. I am waiting for some one who will surely come, and who I don't want to miss.”

Ewald Stiller had never learned to contradict his protector, so he said nothing more, but sought for himself a moment of quiet in a secluded corner, where he looked out with an almost sad attention upon the glittering and kaleidiscopic picture.

A gentle pressure on his arm made him look around hastily, and involuntarily a cry of surprise came from his lips, as he saw a lovely, richly clad girl standing beside him.

“Is your memory then so poor, that you can't even recognize the girl who saved your life?” she asked, in a sweet voice and with a playful glance. “Must I be

the one to demand the payment of your debt of gratitude?"

Ewald looked at the speaker as if she were a vision from another world. The color came and went in his cheeks, and a sunny smile overspread her face at his speechless astonishment.

"Fräulein Hertha—Countess Hertha—is it really you? And have you not forgotten me?"

"Do you think that my memory is as fleeting as yours?" she answered, giving him a bright look. "I have felt as proud as a queen for the last hour on your account. You must not deny me my share in this night's triumph. Of how much pleasure all these people would have been deprived if a young, mischievous girl had not, four years ago, possessed enough skill and daring to handle a fowling-piece."

Her frolicsome manner was perhaps assumed to hide a feeling of another kind, for as she spoke the last words there was a tremble in her voice. Ewald was not in any condition to conceal the deep emotion which overpowered him, beneath a smiling face. He bent over the small hand which had just been laid so caressingly upon his arm, and kissed it.

"Ah, you are mocking me, Countess Hertha," he said, softly and earnestly. "But you must believe me that since that day, no hour has passed in which I have not held you in grateful and reverent remembrance."

Slowly and without unkindness she withdrew her hand from his grasp.

"Why do you say that I mock you," she asked, seriously now. "You deserved a little lecture for overlooking me so coolly, but I have not followed you to your little corner of retreat in order to remind you of our adventure of four years ago—I have come to thank you for to-night's rare treat, and to say that you have

more than fulfilled what both you and I have hoped for you."

"But I am far distant yet from the goal of my hopes!" he responded, modestly. "Your appreciation makes me both proud and happy, and I accept it gladly; for I should never have made even my present progress towards the object of my ambition had I not on that never to be forgotten day gained the victory over what was to me, the severest heart-struggle of my life."

The words came fervently and all too impetuously from his lips, and the Countess could not but be assured that his allusion was to herself. Her charming face colored a little more deeply and for a moment she was embarrassed. But life in the great world had taught her to quickly master all such confusion, and after a few seconds she began chatting as if she had not heard his last significant words: "I must make a reservation in my praise, for it is certain that the accident which brought me here to-night was due to no merit of yours. And you promised me once, that you would seek me out of your own accord."

"God knows I was determined to do it!"

"Really?"

She raised her clear eyes questioningly to his own.

"I wonder if that is any more than a pretty speech, which you, who consider the past of so little moment, offer to me. You would be in a quandary, would you not, if I took you at your word?"

"You are joking, Countess, for if you do not believe—"

Hertha did not let him finish.

"No, no, I will annoy you no longer with the old, forgotten episode, or you will think that I am the same foolish child I was years ago. I have no desire that

you should enact the lonely troubadour, scattering seeds of melody through the land, as you journey in search of my lonely castle. But I should indeed rejoice to welcome you at my father's home at Lankenau, where we go in a few days for the summer."

Her open and frank manner had none of that reserve which was so common in persons of her rank towards those of humbler station, and Ewald for the moment forgot that their intercourse to-night was under other circumstances than the day of their first, romantic meeting under the free heavens, where there were neither walls nor social restrictions to hedge them in.

But he was no longer the awkward, inexperienced lad, who was just taking his first steps upon the battle field of life. He had learned, and learned well, these mysterious class differences, and of how much significance they were to the human race. So he permitted himself to indulge in no foolish, longing hopes merely because a friendly word had been spoken.

Was there not in the bearing of this lovely young Countess, despite her frankness and cordiality, something of a proud superiority, which forbade any familiar advance beyond certain insurmountable barriers?

"You are very gracious, Countess," he said, with a polite bow, "but I fear that noble castles do not stand open for the reception of simple musicians."

"Ah, how proud you have become!" she answered, mimicing archly his measured tones. "But are you really a good judge? For in 'noble castles,' as I know, their owners practice hospitality as a noble duty. I would perhaps exaggerate if I called my father an enthusiast of art, but certainly he has a warm heart for it, and never has one of her disciples come to our door without receiving from him an hearty welcome."

Ewald had determined in spite of this charming girl's cordiality, to remain cool and discreet, but his heart beat so loudly that he almost feared Hertha could read his thoughts in his face. He stammered, awkwardly enough, something about intrusion and unheard-of boldness, and the Countess, perhaps from an impulse of sympathy, added: "My father spoke of you to-night after you left the stage, in terms of the highest praise, and he was among the first to grasp you by the hand, although you perhaps did not hear his name. So I can speak confidently, when I assure you that you will have no cause for complaint, if you, at any time, accept my invitation to become a guest at Lankenau."

Ewald, unable longer to conceal his real pleasure under a polite exterior, was about to assure her how happy he would be to accept her invitation, but Hertha, with a motion of her hand, commanded his silence.

"Promise me nothing! You shall not for a second time be bound by any silly pledge. Who knows where your glorious way may lead, and how many much more important invitations will be given you by to-morrow. Whether we ever meet again or not, I wish you to be assured that my warmest wishes for your success will accompany you in your brilliant career."

Her last words had such a stilted, cold sound, that Ewald, pained and puzzled, could not immediately find words with which to reply and only answered with a bow, as she turned carelessly and left him. Longingly his eyes followed her graceful figure, as she with the confidence which birth and rank alone give, moved slowly down the long salon in the midst of the fashionable, glittering throng.

"What a fool I am!" he said to himself. "As if I could ever in this strange world, be anything else than an unauthorized intruder towards whom a friendly for-

bearance is displayed as long as I shorten their weary hours for them with my violin."

Hertha was met in the middle of the room by a man whose face Ewald did not see, and whom therefore he did not at once recognize. A keen feeling of jealousy took possession of his heart, as he, from his secluded corner, witnessed this meeting. He was too far distant to see the Countess' face but he had a feeling that something beyond the ordinary conventional greetings of society was being exchanged between these two.

This tall, distinguished looking man had, as he caught sight of the Countess, come to a sudden halt, as if surprise, with a blending of confusion, had, half against his will, forced him to stop. Then he had advanced with out-stretched hand to greet her, and as she extended hers half-hesitatingly, he had seized and kissed it with great warmth. Then he began the conversation, which, to Ewald's suspicious eye, had seemed much warmer and more eager than the every-day meetings of fashionable persons demanded. And it was very evident that the Hertha who responded to all this was quite another person from her who had held speech with the young musician. Her former naïveté had entirely disappeared. With bent head and face partially hidden by her fan she listened to her companion. Then he offered her his arm for a promenade of the rooms. As they turned, Ewald for the first time saw the man's face, and a cry of angry surprise broke from his lips, for this favored person was no other than Kurt von Hardenegg, his sister Elfriede's husband.

Truly, Ewald had never loved this brother-in-law. A certain instinctive knowledge of human nature told him that behind this amiable, attractive looking mask there lay a reckless selfishness, and the marriage of his sister, whose pure heart and truth he well knew, to this unre-

liable egotist, gave the first deep pain and sorrow to his young life.

Day after day in this long, hard separation of years had his thoughts turned to his father and sisters, regarding whom he had never heard a word, and he had asked Kostomarow repeatedly if the time had not yet come when he could acquaint his father with his whereabouts and beg humbly for his forgiveness.

But the answers which he received had always been the same: "Beg him for forgiveness when you can prove to him by deeds that you have earned it, or when you fear that he is on his death-bed. But there is no necessity for distressing yourself about that at present, for I have heard from a reliable source that he is in good health. Work and study! That's all you have to do now and everything else will be all right!"

And Ewald had waited patiently, even after his successes in Paris and London, until his patron thought it advisable to return to Germany. If the young artist had followed the inclinations of his heart, he would have hastened at once to his father, and thrown himself upon his breast. But to his astonishment and sorrow as well, he found that his benefactor had decided otherwise. When he expressed a wish to go immediately to his father, Kostomarow instead of replying as formerly with a stern command, gave an answer which more closely resembled a request.

"By such haste you would perhaps destroy a plan, whose success I look to as the final achievement of my life, and which, under certain circumstances, will prove not only of significance to yourself but to all your family. I do not seek to turn your thoughts from your parent and sisters, but trust you will be willing to make this sacrifice for me, for you will have but a short time to wait."

Of course to Ewald such a request was law, and during their stay of several weeks in the capital, he made no further mention of the longing which possessed his whole soul. He asked no questions about this secret plan, although the old man's eccentric behavior would have made such an inquiry excusable. Never before had Kostomarow left him so much alone. An inexhaustible amount of important business seemed to occupy him. Frequently Ewald only saw him for an hour in the day, and once he had gone out of town for nearly a week, Ewald was not invited to accompany him and no mention was made of where he had been. His protégé noticed that he was in a state of intense nervous excitement since his return from the little trip ; but his whole conduct at this time was a mystery to the youth.

But to-night he felt a sensation of real anger at Kostomarow's secretiveness. In what a painful position was he placed by the appearance of Hardenegg. Following his first impulse he took several hasty steps to follow the disappearing pair into the smaller salon, and face his brother-in-law and—if he must—say a fearless word in regard to his unseemly conduct. But a second's calm reflection deterred him from pursuing this course. With what reason could he approach this elegant cavalier—he, who had entered this house under an assumed name and who, doubtless, in the eyes of his haughty brother-in-law was but a runaway boy in need of fatherly correction.

Then he felt the danger of exposing himself to a humiliation in the eyes of the Countess Hertha.

Hastily he sought for Kostomarow in order to get from him advice. But the old man seemed to have disappeared suddenly from the company, and after looking through the dining-salon without finding his old guardian, Ewald decided not to return to his former retreat, fear-

ing he might meet Hardenegg if he did so. He stole unperceived from the brilliantly lighted rooms and threw himself into a coupé which had just driven up to the palace; his heart was filled with a bitterness and pain which his evening's success could not dissipate.

And where was Kostomarow all this time? For he seemed to have entirely forgotten his adopted son. Several of the guests who had listened attentively to the little which their host could tell regarding him, had approached him with no small degree of curiosity and had entered into conversation with him. But they quickly found that the white bearded "Ahasver" could not be accounted among communicative or particularly amiable people. They were dispatched summarily and gruffly enough, and soon no one had enough curiosity to test the doubtful pleasure of a little conversation with the eccentric guest. So Kostomarow was left alone in one of the smaller rooms, and nothing could take his eye from the large folding-doors through which all late comers entered. His tireless vigilance convinced one that it was no idle curiosity, but a steadfast purpose which made him never waver from his watch. At last, when many of the guests had taken their departure, the man for whom he had waited so patiently crossed the threshold.

Kostomarow muttered some unintelligible words to himself and stroked his white beard. Half hidden by the heavy folds of a curtain he stood in a window niche and watched with burning eyes every movement of his nephew, Baron von Hardenegg, who, in his black ball-room attire, had just entered and was greeting some old friends. He observed as attentively as had Ewald, his meeting with and his impassioned manner towards the Countess Hertha, and when they disappeared into

another room he did not lose sight of them, but followed immediately by another way.

Hardenegg and his fair companion were joined at once by two men, and the conversation which ensued was as it seemed, gay and animated. After having their champagne glasses filled, they were just about to drink, laughing and joking the while, to some one's health, when the old man limped close to the group and stood leaning on his crutch. Naturally all eyes were directed toward him, and Hardenegg's surprise was so great that he forgot to carry his raised glass to his lips, and even spilled a few drops of the sparkling liquid over his trembling hand.

He acted at once however upon some sudden thought. Excusing himself hastily to the Countess and putting his untasted glass upon the table, he turned quickly toward Kostomarow.

The old man stood in a window-recess, evidently fully prepared for the interview. His wrinkled, haggard face changed no whit in expression as the young Baron approached. Hardenegg strove to appear unconcerned, and assumed his most amiable tone and manner.

"Herr Kostomarow!" he said. "Is it really you? I should have expected to meet any one else in the world rather than you!"

"Strange things happen sometimes, Herr von Hardenegg! But it is very good of you to remember me at all."

"Why should I not? After your communication regarding my poor uncle I should naturally hold you in grateful remembrance, but when Ewald Stiller disappeared so romantically under your protection, you may rest assured we could not forget you. Do you know I was very angry with you at that time?"

"You see I made no attempt to prevent your being so."

“Well, well! After all, you have not murdered him. What has become of the young man?”

Kostomarow gave that inward chuckle which had been so annoying to the Baron at their first interview.

“No, I have not murdered him, although it seems to me that you would have been inclined to forgive me even if I had done so. But you can render me a service, Herr von Hardenegg.”

He spoke in a superior, condescending tone, but the Baron seemed to-night to have no feeling of resentment in consequence.

“As far as lies within my power—with pleasure,” he answered, promptly. “I am already, in a certain sense, in your debt.”

“Very well! I don’t think you’ll find it a difficult task. As regards this young man, as you call your wife’s brother, he has become a great artist about whom in a short time all Europe will talk. What I say can be confirmed by any of the company here to-night, and he is called, as you may have noticed in the programme, Stillfried Ewald.”

From the Baron’s face it was evident that this surprise was not a pleasant one.

“Ah! Is it possible?” he said, slowly. “Then the name of Stiller is destined to become very popular?”

“It is concerning this that I wish to prefer my request. I think it better that ‘the young man’ should remain unknown for a little longer, and consequently desire no one to know that Ewald Stiller and Stillfried Ewald are one and the same. And it is on this subject, Herr von Hardenegg, that I wish you to preserve silence.”

“Nothing else? Oh, you may trust me to keep your secret inviolate. It is no hardship to escape the world’s congratulations regarding an *artist célèbre* in one’s own family.”

“You will not mention either to your wife or to her father one word about Ewald’s appearance?”

“Not a word, on my honor. As you were able to make so much out of the boy, he surely does better under your protection than under any one’s else. But I feel inclined to make a request in return.”

“Let us hear it.”

“It is trifling enough, only to ask you to repeat to me the history of my uncle’s death.”

“Of his death? I never remember to have spoken of his death.”

“Did you not tell me that with your own eyes you saw him shot down by a soldier and fall heavily wounded?”

“Truly. You were attentive, Herr von Hardenegg!”

“Very well, was not that sufficient proof. And you will do me a little favor, will you not?”

“Why not. What I can say with a clear conscience, I will repeat before any one.”

“If you will allow me I would like to entertain you as my guest to-morrow. You are a little interested in horse racing, I presume?”

“I will interest myself that far, if you desire.”

“That’s right! I shall expect you at the Hotel du Nord at twelve o’clock. We will drive together to the racing grounds, and I’ll promise you some good sport.”

“I shall be rejoiced if I can [in any way return your kindness.”

“Do not trouble yourself on that score, my dear Herr Kostomarow. You will positively come?”

“Yes, at twelve o’clock.”

“Farewell until then. I have a few social duties to fulfil ere I depart.”

With a gracious bow, he turned away and went hurriedly through the rooms in search of the beautiful Countess Hertha.

CHAPTER XV.

It was the great day of the autumn races, and the delightful weather had drawn thousands to the race course. The grand stand was crowded to overflowing and the front seats were bright and gay with the rich costumes of the great society dames. In the square reserved for the horses there was great animation and excitement. The owners of the noble animals either stood in little groups or walked aimlessly about, talking of the chances of their favorites. The jockeys sauntered about in their spotless hose and gay colored silk blouses ; insignificant beardless faces they had for the most part, but they strutted proudly to and fro, anxious to attract the attention of the occupants of the grand stand.

Earnestly talking, the Baron von Rhoden and Hardenegg walked through the square side by side. The keen, sharp cut face of the former showed not the slightest unusual excitement ; but the great, sickening suspense which the other felt, could be read very plainly in his face, and he seemed suddenly to have become years older. They were, naturally enough, talking of the coming race.

“I cannot but think, Hartmuth, that you will be mistaken in your prophesies,” said Hardenegg. “The legs of the redoubtable ‘Klabautermann’ appear to me to be in a very squeamish condition, and Fred Richmond has gotten ‘Eglantine’ in such fine shape that I feel great confidence in the result.”

“In which case no one will be more hearty in his congratulations, than I. But it’s waste of time to talk of

combinations and victory now, it will all be over in half an hour."

Hardenegg pulled out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Yes, you are right," he said, although it was to him a difficult task to turn his thoughts from the all absorbing theme. "All this bustle and confusion will not change the final result. I will go over to the grand stand and greet some of my acquaintances."

"Did none of the ladies of your own family accompany you?"

"What an idea! My wife hasn't the slightest particle of interest in such things."

"And your sister-in-law? Since her riding lessons, she has shown the greatest affection for every thing that has four feet."

Hardenegg forced himself, hard as it was, to make a sportive reply.

"For your sake I am very sorry that I did not bring her with me, Hartmuth, but perhaps it is just as well that I did not; betting and love, you know, do not hold together."

Rhoden shrugged his shoulders. "Bah! I might as well put that beautiful dream away forever. My chances are slight."

Hardenegg looked at him attentively.

"How am I to understand that? Have you changed your mind already?"

"No; but I have no false idea that your protection will count for much against the openly expressed aversion of your wife. And I repeat to you that I shall not put myself in a position to receive a refusal."

"I pledge you my word, that she will accept you when you ask her."

"Well, we will speak further on this subject after the

races. But I have something else to do now, so you must excuse me."

While Hardenegg walked over to the grand stand, Rhoden started for the scales.

Near them a spindle-legged, meagre looking jockey, with a cigarette between his teeth, stood leaning against a post, talking carelessly with some officers. The pale face of this young man, whose every feature showed his English nationality, was not a pleasant thing to look upon. Notwithstanding this, the officers were conversing with him after as confidential and friendly a fashion as they would have done with an equal. Rhoden stepped up quietly to the little group without the jockey's having apparently noticed him. Even the keenest observer could not have detected the glance of understanding which was exchanged between the two.

"You will add a new leaf to your crown of glory to-day, Richmond," said one of the officers. "It is very foolish of Vischering to let the 'Klabautermann' run at all. Henderson will make a master stroke if he gets a second or even a third place."

Fred Richmond took his cigarette from his mouth and blew the smoke out slowly.

"Who knows?" he said, plegmatically. "He will win or lose one or the other."

"That's a bit of sound wisdom," laughed Rhoden, entering into the conversation. "But I think that none of you have done the 'Klabautermann' justice in regard to his ability. I certainly don't wish the animal to win, for all my money is on 'Eglantine'; yet I am sorry to say I do not share your confidence."

A bell sounded at this moment calling the horses for the first start on the programme, and the officers hurried off to obtain good places for observation, getting out their field glasses as they went. Fred Richmond

remained leaning against his post as indifferent as ever and showing not the slightest interest in the race in which he was not a participant. Baron von Rhoden had not gone off with the officers, but stood by apparently as unconcerned as the jockey himself.

“Well, Fred,” he said, half aloud in English, “I hope we understand one another perfectly.”

“I hope so too, sir,” was the negligent answer. “You have my promise.”

“Yes. And I know that one can rely on your skill too, when you mean to be honest.”

“Honest, sir?” The jockey grinned broadly. “I believe you would be anything but content with me if I were.”

“Well, you may call it what you please. You are to hold the ‘Eglantine’ back, under all circumstances.”

“I’ll see that the poor beast don’t run herself to death, sir. But I make this sacrifice for you out of gratitude and a full heart, for it is sure enough that I lose by it.”

“Why this fine speech, Fred, after we have settled on the money. You put a cursed high price on your little favor, at any rate, my fine fellow.”

“That’s as you please to look at it, sir. Would you wish to throw the whole business up? I should willingly do so, for to speak frankly, it goes against my honor to carry out your plans.”

Rhoden answered him only with a sneering laugh, which seemed not to have the slightest effect upon the Englishman, nor to arouse him from his apathy.

“But if any one suspects foul play?” he continued, in unchanged tones, snapping the ashes from his cigarette with his little finger. “And if I am excluded from the race course for a few months, what then, sir?”

The Baron gave him a friendly slap upon the shoulder, and leaning over whispered in his ear :

“If Fred Richmond were a bungler, the danger could still be avoided and suspicion averted by a little harmless manœuvre. I have looked well after that and know how to turn attention from you. I think we know one another, old friend.”

Fred gave a half ironical, half flattered smile.

“Well, sir, you have my promise. I will do all I can.”

Then they separated, surely with other feelings than those of mutual esteem and respect.

Hardenegg had, in the meantime, gone slowly toward the front seats on the stand. He did not hasten, for he was indifferent to the acquaintances whom he would probably meet there, and old Kostomarow, whom he regarded in a certain measure as his guest, had, soon after their arrival on the race course, disappeared without leaving any trace of his whereabouts. So the Baron mounted slowly and almost reluctantly the high wooden steps. Suddenly he heard a voice which he thought he knew, and his countenance brightened wonderfully when on looking in the direction from which it came he perceived the Countess Hertha von Bassewitz. She was charmingly attired, and her face was partially hidden by a white silk and lace parasol. She was conversing animatedly with her father and an officer of Hussars.

Without a moment's reflection, Hardenegg went at once toward her. All his care and anxiety vanished instantly at the thought of meeting her again. Although they had spoken of the to-morrow's races the evening before, she had not uttered one syllable of intimation that she would be there, and a flattering voice whispered to the Baron's heart that she had perhaps been purposely silent in order to give him a delightful surprise. The amiable, bright manner in which she greeted him contained no contradiction of this assumption, and he felt

his heart beat exultingly as he took in at a glance her almost overwhelming loveliness.

Where had his thoughts been when he had listened to his mother's well-laid plan for this marriage, and laughed it to scorn as a foolish chimera of her brain? And where had his eyes been on that day when he had first beheld her budding beauty? It would only have cost him a few words then to have torn asunder the net which was already over his head, and which was so soon to envelop him completely. If he had only come to his senses in time, this beautiful creature with all her bewitching charms would now have been his, making him the happiest and most enviable of mortals.

He breathed heavily as he forced himself to appear gay and unconcerned. His mother's last significant words sounded again and again in his ear, and it was as if a hobgoblin stood behind him, continually interrupting his lively gossip with the beautiful Countess, with the mocking and scornful words: "What is the painter's daughter in comparison to her? Free yourself from your fetters and she is yours! The chains which your own folly have forged can be broken!"

The Count treated him in a friendly and pleasant manner, just as he would any other acquaintance of his own rank. So long as Hardenegg's wife was not with him there existed no necessity for shunning him.

"You have become, within the past few years, quite celebrated in sporting circles, my dear Hardenegg," he said, jestingly. "You are doubtless here to-day to reap a golden harvest?"

"Or to help some one else to garner his," answered the other. "A race-horse, if one only learns to believe it, is as little to be relied upon as any other implement which serves the whims of fortune. I'll be glad, though, when the decisive race is over."

“So you have been betting?” said Hertha. “I think after all there must be a certain charm in the suspense while one awaits the result of his ventures.”

“Then let us make a bet, Countess. For the North German Derby, of course, for none of the other races to-day are of any importance.”

“And what will the stake be, Herr von Hardenegg?”

“Anything upon which you decide. If you wish it, all I possess, house and lands, body and soul.”

He had spoken these last words in a lower tone so as not to attract the attention of the Count. Hertha appeared to take it all as a joke, for she answered, promptly, without embarrassment: “No, no, that is much too high for me. I don’t understand much about these bets, but I know that they are generally equal on both sides. But perhaps it would be better not to decide until after the race, then let the winner fulfil any wish which the loser sees fit to ask, whether trifling or heavy.”

She looked at him, smiling carelessly as she spoke. The Baron controlled with difficulty the passionate glance of his eye, and the words which rushed to his lips and strove to answer carelessly.

“I accept the bet,” he said, quickly, “and I beg you, Countess, to keep the conditions well in mind: The winner’s wish must be fulfilled, whether trifling or heavy.”

“Certainly! But I warn you in advance that you will be the loser. I know nothing of the horses, but I will choose the best colors. Give me your programme. I see—there is blue and red. Jockey Henderson rides Count Vischering’s full blooded English horse ‘Klabautermann; that is my color.’”

“Well, you have accidentally chosen the horse against which all my money is placed. Now I shall wish more ardently than ever that ‘Eglantine’s’ wings may grow.”

A few minutes later the signal for the start of the day's special race was given, and the people on the stand and the thousands of eager spectators beneath, to so many of whom this race was of the deepest importance, turned eagerly to their places, or settled themselves as best they could, to watch with breathless anxiety and interest for what was so soon to follow.

"Eglantine" had won the best position on the inside of the track and Hardenegg noted through his glass with inward satisfaction the animal's frame, and in what fine condition she seemed, for her to-day's triumph or—defeat.

"There is your enemy, Countess," he said to his beautiful neighbor. "Keep that yellow jockey well in your eye. I have never seen a better rider than he."

"What a disagreeable face he has," replied the Countess. "If I were the owner of that horse I would never trust that man to ride him."

Their conversation then ceased as did that of all others in that vast assemblage. Fourteen horses had been put in position and all eyes were upon them, and as the riders one by one took their positions, countless hails, jests and hurrahs were heard on all sides from their many admirers. In a few seconds the curiosity of the spectators had turned into the most eager and passionate interest. Even Countess Hertha had become excited, and it was as well for the Baron that it was so, otherwise a look at him at this moment would hardly have raised him in her estimation. His face had become a dark red, his eyes were unnaturally dilated, and his hands trembled so violently that he was forced to lower his field glass. He leaned heavily against the side of the parapet, and one could see the blood-swollen veins starting out on his forehead and neck and hands.

He was not contented with the start. The "Eglantine" had won the best position, but the keen eye of the Baron

was not quite so well pleased with the yellow jockey. It was not Fred Richmond's way to force his horse so much at the start as he did to-day. It was a fine beginning, to be sure, but there was the great fear that after such exertions at first the horse's strength would be used up, and certain uneasy movements of the animal's head proved that she was not going with her usual steady security.

The "Klabautermann" was fifth at the start, and seemed to make no exertions to advance; he went slowly on, making no apparent effort, but gaining at every step. It was third, and now—now he was only a couple of lengths behind the flying "Eglantine" and all eyes were upon him.

Hardenegg leaned as far out as was possible without losing his balance. If he had been in the race course himself, running against the horses for a wager, he could not have been more exhausted and breathless. Only two lengths behind and but half of the course covered. Fred Richmond seemed however to appreciate the situation, and was apparently doing his best. The distance between "Eglantine" and "Klabautermann" seemed for a short time singularly unchanged, until suddenly scarce fifteen yards from the winning post, "Klabautermann's" position changed; one spurt and he was side by side with "Eglantine." Fred Richmond beat his horse unmercifully, but the overtaxed, breathless animal was no longer in condition to make the final effort. With a spring "Klabautermann" passed the goal, half a length in advance of the other horse, amid the deafening shouts and cries of the multitude, who by this time were half crazy with excitement. Countess Hertha waved her handkerchief gaily and shouted out a loud "Bravo" to the happy jockey as he rode slowly past the stand on his exhausted but victorious horse. Then, for the first

time she turned back toward the Baron, in order to give him a jesting word regarding his defeat. But when she saw his dark red, quivering face she was speechless. Hardenegg must have noticed the surprise and consternation in her face, for he made a great effort to pull himself together and conceal his real feelings. But he knew that it would be an impossibility for him to restrain himself for any length of time even in the presence of the Countess.

“You are the victor, undoubtedly,” he said, with an artificial smile. “I humbly await the fate to which you may assign me.” His excitement was so fearful that Hertha could not but see the terrible effort it was for him to wear the conventional mask, and she felt painfully disturbed.

“I have given no thought as yet to the request which I shall make of you,” she responded, coldly. “Later, perhaps, something fitting will occur to me.”

She turned from him abruptly, toward the officer of Hussars who was coming back again with spur-clinking steps, and Hardenegg decided, after a slight hesitation, to leave the stand without the customary adieus which politeness demanded.

With weary bearing he stepped across the grass plot in the centre of the course to seek out Rhoden. The next quarter of an hour would force from him one of the hardest decisions of his life, and he smiled grimly as he thought that he, the envied of thousands, as one of the richest land owners in the country, was now in such monetary difficulties, that he must either resign himself recklessly to the power of a friend, or place himself in the dirty hands of conscienceless usurers.

He wandered around fully ten minutes before he caught sight of his friend. Rhoden stood in a secluded corner back of the weighing room in earnest conversa-

tion with his English friend, Fred Richmond. The jockey had now thrown an elegant overcoat over his silk blouse, and the inevitable cigarette was already smoking between his colorless lips. He looked just as unconcerned and insolent as before the races.

"Do you know, good friend," Rhoden was saying, while happiness and victory gleamed in his eyes, "that the pious wish that you'd break your precious neck, was not far from me. Was it really only a blind fatality that 'Klabautermann' took the lead at the last?"

The jockey shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"He took the lead and that must be enough for you, sir. I have kept my word, but how I kept it is my affair!"

At this moment Hardenegg stepped up to them. With angry, threatening glance he looked at the slight looking Englishman.

"Until to-day I was of the opinion you understood how to ride," he said, speaking in a peculiarly insulting manner, "but I have learned to my sorrow that I was in error. You are a bungler, and one would scarcely care to trust you to drive a cab, much less to ride in a race."

The jockey smiled spitefully. He exchanged a quick glance with Rhoden, then turned on his heel and left them, without replying even by a single look.

Hardenegg seized his friend's arm impatiently.

"What now?" he said. "Your prophecy has been fulfilled, and without your help I am lost."

"You look at the matter too gloomily. It isn't so bad as you think. But we cannot talk it over out here under the blue heavens and in the midst of this crowd. Let us go into the restaurant and drink a bottle of Heidsieck!"

The Baron made no dissent, and they both entered

the pavilion. The half dark rooms were already filled, and it seemed for a moment impossible to get a seat, and especially any place for quiet conversation. At last Rhoden beckoned to a waiter.

“Bring us a bottle of Heidsick to that little table over in the far corner; it seems the only one not taken in the whole place.” The waiter was quick and soon brought them their wine and filled their glasses for them. These two had taken possession of their dark corner without noticing the white-bearded old man who sat at the neighboring table.

“We can speak out here without fear, Hartmuth,” began Hardenegg.

“This affair has regulated itself after such a fashion that I think no farther discussion is necessary. Are you in the same humor regarding the subject which we discussed at Castle Buchwald eight days ago?”

“Yes. But at the time, I freely expressed to you my doubts as to your ability to fulfil my conditions.”

Hardenegg frowned.

“It’s enough for you, I take it, that I have confidence in my own ability and that I pledge myself to meet your demands. You will, of course, go home with me, and I tell you now that you may to-day set any time you like for your betrothal and marriage.”

“Very well, it must be an early date. I told you that once before, on account of my family.”

“All right! Shall I receive the necessary funds to-day?”

“Yes, you can have the money to-day if you require it.”

“Without putting any incumbrance upon my estate?”

“Undoubtedly, since you have no power to incumber it.”

It seemed to Hardenegg as though a fearful load had

been lifted from his heart. He had drunk several glasses of champagne during their short conversation. As he looked around, he now for the first time, recognised the Russian who sat so near him in the dark corner. An added color came into his face, for he saw to his dismay that Kostomarow must have heard every word of their bargain. He rose quickly and invited the old man to take a place with them at their table.

“You will not, of course, gossip over what you have heard?” he said, forcing himself to smile. “You have lived long enough in the world to know that even the wealthiest men often get into temporary money embarrassments, particularly if they are fools enough to risk much at cards or pin their faith to a horse’s legs. Just now I am myself in just such a little difficulty. A millionaire who finds it hard to raise a few thousands—it has its comical side, has it not? But so it is; and I cannot raise a penny on Buchwald, although it is altogether unencumbered.”

Kostomarow, who had lost no word of this lightly given statement, nodded in assent.

“Of course not,” he answered. “The estates are the property of Baron Botho von Hardenegg.”

“Yes, the property of a dead man, whose sole legal heir I am. It’s the most absurd thing in the world, but I have already taken measures to bring this unnatural condition of affairs to an end.”

“I should think it was high time,” assented Kostomarow, and his deep-set eyes sparkled brighter than ever.

But Hardenegg noticed nothing, in fact he grew each moment more exultant over the relief which Rhoden had promised him. “Of course, Hartmuth,” he said to his friend, “you must have some security, at least

until the fulfilment of your desires. Whatever you decide upon as worth while."

"You can give me a note for the entire sum, payable in fourteen days. If within half that time my betrothal with Fräulein Stiller is an accomplished fact, I'll give you back your paper in exchange for a simple note of hand due in three years."

"That's no more than fair. The thing is settled; your word upon it, Hartmuth!"

"My word upon it! If you wish, we can drive into town now or an hour later, in order to arrange the matter with my banker."

"And now a glass to our friendship and to the bonds of relationship which will in the future unite us all the more closely. And you must join us, Herr Kostomarow. For to you I owe many thanks. If it had not been for our accidental meeting in the old artist's rookery, and the positive assurance of the death of my uncle which I received from your mouth, things would be in different shape now."

Kostomarow had not heeded the request. His glass, whether through awkwardness or intent, had been upset and its contents spilled over the table.

"I have never spoken of the death of Botho von Hardenegg," he said, and his voice had a deep, almost angry sound. "It would not surprise me to see him standing this minute between you and your friend."

Rhoden pricked up his ears, but the Baron's good humor was not to be disturbed.

"You'd better be careful or my friend will imagine that you belong to the spiritualists," he answered, laughing. "For if my sainted uncle should re-appear he could only come from the spirit world, and we are not quite benighted enough to believe in such a possibility. Herr Kostomarow, my dear Hartmuth, will tell you for your

satisfaction, that sixteen or seventeen years ago on the snow-covered steppes of Siberia he saw my uncle fall under the rifles of Russian soldiers. Herr Kostomarow and the Baron were at the time endeavoring to make their escape from the mines in which they had been serving out a penal sentence. Am I telling the truth or not?"

"Your words are true, Herr von Hardenegg!"

"Very well, then; that is more than enough to give us certainty as to his fate, but if your conscience requires that I add any qualification to my statement, I will willingly concede that you never said you had helped to bury him. We've talked enough, however, about the old gentleman, who seems to have done our family name little honor in a foreign land. Let us drink a silent glass to his memory; then we'll drink a foaming bumper to health and beauty. Fill your glasses, gentlemen—to those we love!"

His eyes gleamed brightly. Rhoden had not seen him so gay for a long time.

"Here's to your wife then, Herr von Hardenegg!" growled the old man in his hoarse, grating voice.

But the Baron, who in his joy over his deliverance had forgotten all dignity and self-respect, laughed in his face.

"I hope it's not my wife whom you love, Kerr Kostomarow? Still you are at perfect liberty to drink her health. For my part I am thinking of the fairest of all women, a goddess whose beauty far surpasses that of the divinity worshiped by our ancestors, whose name she bears. Her health, gentlemen, her health!"

He emptied his glass and flung it to the ground, where it flew into a thousand pieces, then he cast a glance at his watch and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"It's time to arrange our wretched money matters,

Hartmuth," said he. "Will you accompany us into the city, Herr Kostomarow?"

The old man shook his white head. "I think I will remain here a little longer."

"All right. Good-bye! I trust chance will bring us together again somewhere."

He extended his hand in parting, but Kostomarow appeared not to notice the movement.

"I hope so, too, Herr von Hardenegg. Indeed, I think I may very safely promise you that we shall meet again."

The two friends allowed the Russian to pass out first in deference to his age, and he hobbled off while they walked towards the place where their carriage was standing.

"A most disagreeable old rascal," said Rhoden, "with a face to frighten children out of their wits, and take away a man's appetite."

Hardenegg replied, with exuberant hilarity: "Why, what's the matter with you? He's simply an old fool who ought to have been shut up in a lunatic asylum twenty years ago. An old codger like that's an amusing specimen to meet once in awhile."

The subject of these remarks, had he been seen by any one at that moment, would have given his observer ample cause for doubting the sanity of his understanding. He had halted at the first bend in the road which hid him from the view of his late companions, and had struck his knotted cane with great force into the grassy carpet at his feet, while he stretched out his haggard arm and shook his fist vehemently at the empty air.

"Yes, we shall meet again," he hissed, unmindful of the casual passers-by who stared at him. "And you will curse the hour when we do! The measure of your

vileness is full to the brim. — It is time now for the dead to rise !”

He hobbled on to the railway station, and the train took him back to town long before the two nobles in their carriage had reached it.

CHAPTER XVI.

On the following evening Hardenegg and Rhoden arrived at Castle Buchwald, and as their coming had not been announced, Hardenegg's mother had not expected them. Since her return home she had adopted the manner of life of an invalid, never taking her meals with the household, and only appearing for a fleeting moment now and then during the day.

Even her son did not see her on this evening as she had already retired to rest, and he did not feel like intruding upon her. So the two friends took their evening meal with Elfriede and her sister, and as the young mistress of the castle seemed more depressed and disheartened than usual, this repast was by no means gay or animated. Marguerite too was thoughtful and absent minded. She did not give the friendly attention which she had formerly done to Rhoden's jokes and lively sallies. Perhaps it was her frosty behavior which made him, under pretext of fatigue, retire as soon as he had finished his meal, without even waiting to join Kurt in smoking a cigar or take a hand at *écarté*. Marguerite had slipped out softly some time before, so that Hardenegg was alone with his silent and motionless wife. He was uneasy and nervous. His enthusiasm in the hour when it was suggested to him to free himself with

one blow from the fetters which now bound him, had to some extent died away, and the difficulties which he would have to encounter in the carrying out of this plan pressed heavily upon him. Surely it would be best to get Rhoden's debt off his mind first and explain the situation of affairs to-day rather than delay until to-morrow.

"It is fortunate that we can so soon find an opportunity to speak to one another without fear of interruption," he said, in a tone more domineering than friendly. "I have a pleasant communication to make to you, Elfriede. To announce a suitor for your sister's hand."

She gave him a quick, surprised glance, and he fancied he read a look of anxiety in her eyes. That was enough to increase his irritability.

"I do not wish you to overlook," he continued, with a marked sharpness of tone, "the fact that this is a piece of great good fortune for your family. And as the wooer is everything that is to be desired personally, as well as in birth and fortune, I have given my consent unhesitatingly."

"And who is this suitor, Kurt?"

"I think you must know to whom I refer, although I was greatly surprised at the earnestness and depth of his attachment. It is no other than my friend Rhoden."

Elfriede showed no signs of astonishment. Her husband's impressive introduction on this subject had left no doubt in her mind that the Baron was the man, but the expression of sorrowful determination which came over her face proved that her feelings were anything but joyful.

"You certainly have not given your consent, Kurt, without asking Marguerite?" she asked, in her soft voice, but there was a certain quiet intensity in her tones which he well remembered having heard before on the

day on which he had so openly insulted the old painter. And this was enough now to arouse within him passionate excitement and anger.

“And why not?” he asked, violently. “Do you think that Baron Rhoden, my tried and true friend, is not worthy to possess the hand of Fräulein Marguerite Stiller?”

Fearlessly she met his dark, angry glance.

“No, he seems to me altogether unworthy,” she said, quietly and distinctly. “He would make her unhappy and I would never permit her to marry him.”

Hardenegg stared at his wife as if she was some strange creature, the like of which he had never seen before. He had been prepared for a weak, timorous attempt at resistance; but this cool, open declaration of war confused him for the moment.

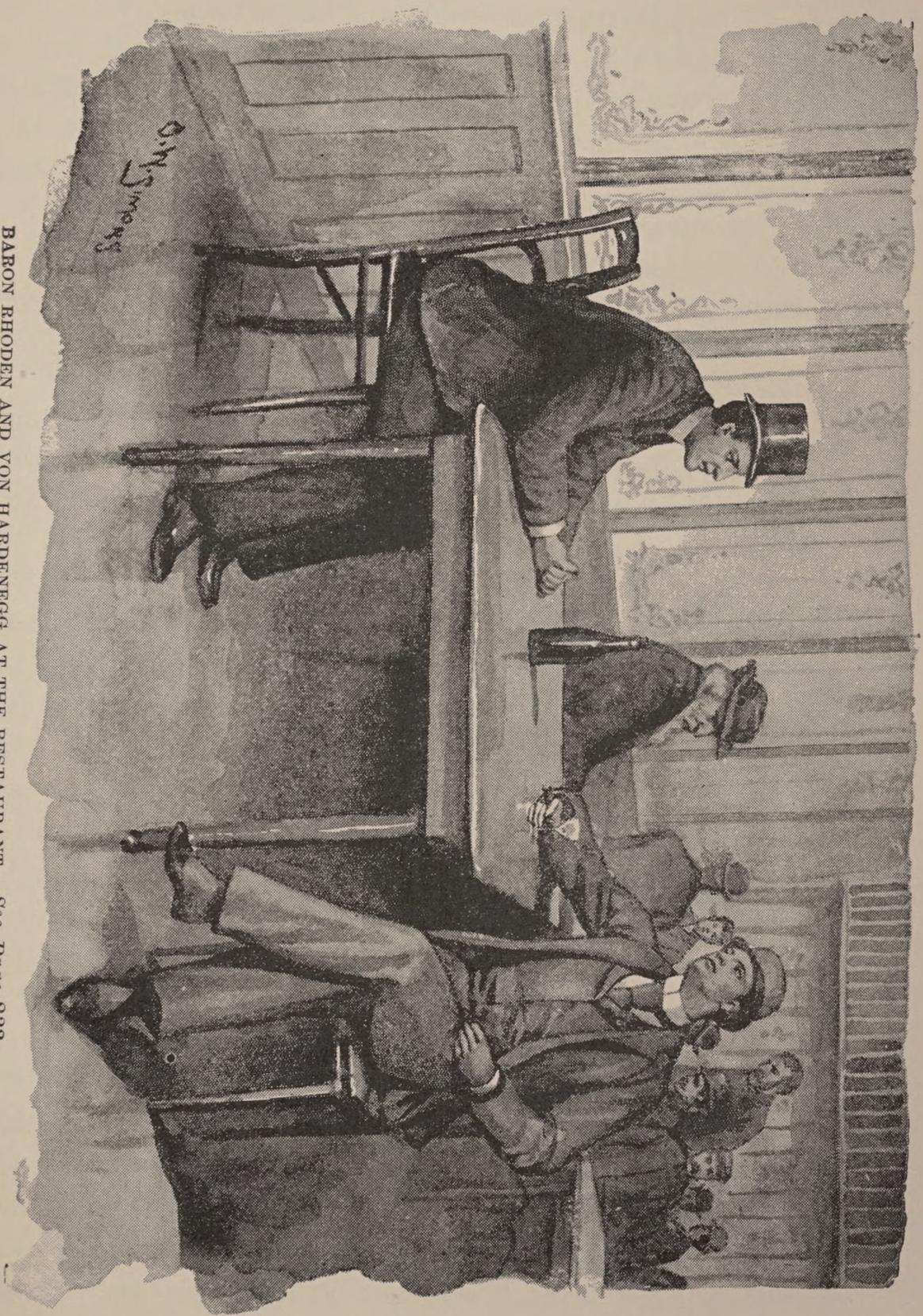
“You will not permit it?” he repeated, after a second’s silence. “And you imagine that that settles it? I can but say to you that you will discover you have made a mighty error as to the extent of your power. I will put an end most decidedly to your childish expressions of dislike and aversion, which I have suffered too long already, and will ask you to remember that I have yet the good fortune to be the head of my own family. But I will not give you an opportunity to say that I was inaccessible to reasonable remonstrance. Give me your reasons for believing that Rhoden will not make your sister happy.”

“I doubt the sincerity and genuineness of his love. I hardly think he would care to marry Marguerite at all were he not allured by the thought of triumphing over me—over me whom he hates with his whole soul.”

Hardenegg answered with a sneer on his lips.

“I was not aware that my friend had any intense feeling either for or against you, and the assumption that

BARON RHODEN AND VON HARDENEGG AT THE RESTAURANT.—See Page 233.



he would have a desire for so petty a satisfaction is too ridiculous to command a moment's credence. A man would hardly marry in order to vex some one whom he dislikes. If you have no sounder objections than these you must excuse me from listening to their enumeration."

"And even if he did feel any love for her to-day, how quickly would this fire of straw be extinguished? He has the reputation now of having broken many women's hearts."

"Well, what else? Haven't you learned in these four years that your narrow-minded views of life are far different from those of the society circles to which Rhoden by birth and education belongs? Truly, you should not come to me with Sunday-School morality."

"This narrow-minded morality is my sister's most sacred possession. When you destroy it you take from her life its happiness and its best impulses. Baron Rhoden might better choose his life's companion from that circle in which, as you say, birth and education gives one so free and liberal a conception of life's higher duties and obligations."

He perceived that her words were a severe judgment upon his own conduct; it almost seemed as if she had read his secrets thoughts. A nameless fury welled up in his heart against this proud, fearless woman who stood opposite to him.

"Is it from your friend Werner that you have learned such virtuous wisdom?" he asked, in spiteful anger. "And what pious excuse has he found for you and for himself, whenever any trifling omission of this earnest fulfilment of duty is to be overlooked?"

Her beautiful eyes opened wide. She did not at first grasp the nature of the insult which he had flung at her.

“Kurt!” came from her trembling lips. “Is it possible that your words have reference to me?”

Hardenegg felt that in his anger he had gone too far, considering the insufficient proof which the story related by his mother had given him.

“We will speak of that another time,” he said, gloomily; “for Pastor Werner’s account I will have to turn over another page. For to-night I wish above all to come to a distinct understanding concerning this marriage affair. You now know my wishes in regard to the matter, and for your sister’s sake it will be well for you to raise no further objection. But I will tell you something which shall, I trust, remove all your doubts. Rhoden has not only my hearty consent, but he possesses also the means for a terrible revenge should I withdraw it. That he would make use of this means I have no doubt, for he would almost be forced to do so. Now reflect well, whether you will or will not use your influence to induce Marguerite to refuse this proposal, which is the best one she will ever get. Will you, merely to gratify your foolish and unreasonable whims, not only interfere with your sister’s well-being, but with my prosperity as well? For I can assure you that if you do, you and you alone will have to answer for it. I will give you until to-morrow to decide.”

He started to leave the room, but her remonstrance, made with no show of anger, held him back.

“I need no time, Kurt, and all you have told me only strengthens me in my determination to do my duty, which is surely a sacred one towards my sister. I know not what you have to dread from Rhoden, but I swear to you now that my innocent, unsuspecting sister shall not be the price of your ransom.”

Hardenegg looked at her as if he would have struck her. He had made an avowal to her which was in

itself a humiliation in order to conquer if possible her resistance, and in spite of all this she had not been moved from her original determination. With clenched fist he stood before her scarcely able to master his fury.

“Woman!” he hissed, between his clenched teeth, “have you forgotten what I have done for you and your tribe? Have you forgotten the misery from which I took you, the sorrowful future from which I delivered you? Had you no thought then of making a good match—of doing the best you could for yourself?”

The more brutal his manner and words had become the more marble-like in appearance grew Elfriede’s face.

“It is just because I do not wish my fate to be repeated in Marguerite’s life that I shall oppose your plans by every means which I can command.”

Hardenegg went to the table with quick steps and rang the bell violently. “We will see about that,” he said; “I am a little curious to learn how far you will venture to go in this affair!” Then turning to the servant who was just entering, he ordered: “Say to Fräulein Stiller that we wish to see her on a very important and pressing matter, and beg her to come here at once.” Silently, with his hands clasped behind him, he walked up and down the room. Elfriede went up to him and held out her hands beseechingly:

“Kurt, I beseech you—let me speak to my sister first. She knows nothing of life, and sees everything with a child’s eyes.”

“All the better, then, for her judgment will not be biased. She shall not be influenced in the slightest by you.”

The door opened and graceful, pretty Marguerite stood upon the threshold. Surprised and a little fright-

ened at a summons at such a late hour she glanced doubtfully from one to another. Hardenegg went up to her and took her hand to reassure her.

“We are just on the point, dear Marguerite, of discussing a subject, which could not be satisfactorily concluded without you,” he said, as he led her to a chair. “My friend Rhoden wishes to marry you, although that is to you, of course, no secret, for you have doubtless read his heart long ago, and I am here to sue for him. His fate lies in your hands. Will you make him the happiest of men?”

The timid uncertainty of the young maiden had changed quickly into honest amazement.

“The Baron von Rhoden—I? Ah, it is only a little joke, Kurt, which you are having at my expense.”

“No joke, but sober earnest! My friend Hartmuth loves you devotedly, has done so ever since our”—it was very repugnant to him to have to mention his wedding day—“since the first day he met you, and I have long noticed that he was not indifferent to you. Is there any need for my saying a word in his praise? He is a noble fellow and a very wealthy man. He will make your life such that thousands of women will envy you, and they will have cause.”

“But how—how can it be possible? He wants to marry me—me? And why did he not tell me so himself?”

Hardenegg had looked fixedly at Elfriede as he spoke the last words. It seemed as though he hoped by his threatening, intense glance to keep her silent. But he had not foreseen that Marguerite would hasten to her sister and hide her glowing face on her bosom.

“My friend came to me chiefly,” he continued in a raised voice, “because he feared there might be some influence at work to which you would give heed, inimical

to his interests. And for that very reason I beg you to give me your answer at once !”

“But I don't know yet what it will be ! I cannot believe it is all true, I cannot indeed. Tell me Elfriede—dear Elfriede, what shall I do ?”

“If your own heart does not force you irresistibly to give ‘Yes’ for an answer, then—”

“Silence !” thundered Hardenegg with reckless violence, again throwing his tiresome mask from him. “Your views in this affair are without significance, and Marguerite is old enough to consider and decide her future for herself.”

Terrified by his vehement tone the young girl's frame shook violently. She threw a sharp glance at the red, angry countenance of her brother-in-law, and then at Elfriede's face, which, while almost stone-like in its composure, bore the marks of anguish. Although entirely ignorant of the inward workings of all this, she realized instinctively that in her hands lay the decision of some matter vitally affecting her sister's happiness. Clinging more closely and tenderly to Elfriede, she said, looking earnestly at her sister's husband : “I believe that it will always be best for me to seek advice from my sister. And I will certainly not neglect doing so in a matter of so great moment to myself. I cannot give you the answer which you wish upon the spot. This proposal was most unexpected, and I need time for consideration. Can Baron Rhoden not allow me three days in which to decide, and if I can answer before—”

Hardenegg did not permit her to finish. He felt that here he had come to the limits of his power, and that another violent, hasty word might ruin his play altogether. With gloomy, knit brow he stepped close to his young sister-in-law and said : “The time for consideration is granted you, although I confess I cannot under-

stand the necessity. But I cannot forbear to give you a word of warning. Elfriede's advice may be of inestimable value to you in all other things ; but here is a matter in which you alone must decide, and concerning which no one else should be responsible, especially one who is blindly prejudiced. I will not attempt to influence you, but I do assure you, and most impressively too, that you can do your sister no worse service than by refusing to accept my friend's offer. Think well on these last words of mine before you come to a decision ; now we've had enough for to-day—good-night !”

He went out of the room and for several minutes after his departure Marguerite did not venture to speak. Sobbing she leaned her head on her sister's shoulder and Elfriede put her arm tenderly around her. It was the latter who finally broke the silence.

“Do not weep !” she said, gently. “You will be my strong, courageous little sister, who will not permit herself to be forced by an idle, empty threat into any position to which her heart does not respond.”

“Ah, Elfriede, if I only knew what I should do. This scene was frightful. I have never seen your husband act so before, and I feel very anxious and unhappy on your account.”

“In spite of that you must do what will bring happiness to your heart and content into your future life. You must not give your hand to this malicious man of the world, this gambler and libertine.”

“And if I say ‘No,’ what will happen to you, Elfriede ?”

“Nothing that need cause you uneasiness. What could happen to me ?”

“Kurt's words sounded very threatening. I think there is some terrible purpose hidden behind them.

What did he mean when he said I could do you no worse service?"

"I do not know, Marguerite. But whatever it may be you must make no mistake in your decision. Surely the sacrifice of one life is enough."

The words slipped almost unconsciously from the pale lips of the worn wife, and tore asunder the veil with which she had enveloped herself since the day when she accepted Hardenegg, and through which the young sister had never been able to discern the anguish of heart and almost incomprehensible sorrow of her life at Castle Buchwald. Now Marguerite learned suddenly that there had been a terrible sacrifice and also for whom it had been made, and the knowledge came to her with a kind of sickening horror. But she scarcely understood the great change which the last few seconds had wrought upon her heart. Silently and sorrowingly she clasped her dear sister in her arms; then she kissed her and whispered, tenderly: "I have three days of grace, and who knows what may happen within that time! Good-night, my own, precious sister—good-night!"

She would wait until the end of the third day to see if any thing would really happen, but as she lay thinking during the long sleepless night her decision was already taken. Why did she deserve a better fate than her cherished sister? Was it not her duty to follow the noble example which Elfriede had set her? It seemed very clear to her now that she must not refuse the Baron. Hardenegg had certainly meant what he said, it was no idle jest that his wife would be made to suffer for her delinquencies. She was glad of a little respite before the fatal word would be spoken, but Elfriede should never learn of the burden which was already pressing on her heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

A light, one-horse carriage halted before the pastor's house at Frauensee. With quick, elastic step Ewald Stiller sprang out, and Kostomarow followed, descending with greater deliberation from the high seat. The pastor's old housekeeper watched them attentively from a chamber window, and marked with surprise the large trunk at the back of the little vehicle which indicated that the travelers had come to stay. Her master had made no mention of expected guests, and his mode of living was so simple and his circle of acquaintance so limited, that she felt confident these people, who ever they might be, were not expected.

"Perhaps they have been driven to the wrong house," she thought, striving to cheer herself. "The young man is certainly a handsome lad, but as for the old one he looks like the devil himself."

Nevertheless, she hastened to put on a clean white apron, before opening the door to the two strangers who were already coming up the garden path. She met them on the threshold, and the first few words of the old man destroyed her faint hope that there was some mistake.

"Is this Pastor Werner's house?" he asked; "and can we speak to him?"

"To be sure, the Herr Pastor is in his study. And if I may ask with whom I have the pleasure—"

"That is not necessary! We will announce ourselves, and you need only show us the way. In the meantime, coachman, you can get the trunk down and carry it into the house. We will not detain you unnecessarily."

"Heaven help us, this is a pretty kettle of fish! You

have come to stay then !” thought the housekeeper, but she gave no expression to her thought, for Kostomarow’s dark and forbidding face was before her, and he took away all her courage. Silently she led the way across the cosy little hall, with its white sand strewn board floor and high wainscoting, to the door of the young clergyman’s study.

“Thank you, Frau,” muttered the old man ; “and now will you have the goodness to look after our baggage ?”

And as the woman, nodding her head, trotted away, he knocked on the door. A deep, mild voice called out, “Come in,” and the next moment Ewald was grasping the hand and looking yearningly in the face of his old-time friend.

Great was Werner’s surprise and delight at meeting his boy friend, and it was several minutes before he turned to the old man who still stood silently by the door leaning on his crutch. Werner recognized him immediately, although the two had never exchanged a word, and gave him a cordial welcome.

Kostomarow shook hands with him, and a beam of joyful pride shone in his eyes as he said : “I think my boy’s appearance furnishes proof that he has not gone to the dogs under my guidance, but I owe it to him to state that his own merits have been the most powerful forces at work to place him where he is. He is a brave youth and honestly deserves his happiness and fame. He would have done much without any assistance from me. And now, my dear Herr Pastor, will you relieve his mind by assuring him that his father and sisters are in the land of the living. I have told him so repeatedly, but your confirmation of my statement will be a relief to him.”

Werner looked with astonishment at Ewald,

“How is this? You have not come from them? Why, you must have passed them on your way here.”

Ewald looked a little embarrassed, but Kostomarow came, in his straightforward manner, to his assistance.

“You must not scold him, for if I had not used my influence the soft-hearted boy would have thrown his arms around his father’s neck three years ago. But just now there is another matter pressing, and on my account he will wait a few days more before going to his own family. Shall we be able for that short time to take up our quarters with you?”

“My modest house is yours for any length of time. But does it not seem cruel, Herr Kostomarow, to keep this dearly loved son and brother even one day longer from his kinsfolk?”

“I have already resigned myself to my benefactor’s wishes, John,” said Ewald, hastily. “Herr Kostomarow has given me such numberless instances of his friendship and his warmth of heart that I would be guilty of unparalleled ingratitude if I acted in opposition to his will. And they are all well, are they not?”

“Perfectly well, as far as I know.”

“And my sister Elfriede? Is she happy?”

The clergyman’s face grew very earnest. He had no right to tell what he knew; but he could not lie.

“If an earnest fulfilment of duty could make one happy, Ewald, then your sister certainly is so. For all else, you must question her.”

The young artist asked no further questions. Werner’s words and tone were a confirmation of what he had always feared. And Werner evidently did not care to continue the conversation, for he excused himself to his visitors and went to have speech with his housekeeper concerning the ways and means of housing his guests, and although the good old soul was not overjoyed at the

additional trouble, yet she was anxious enough to do what lay in her power to please her dearly loved master. Her own sleeping room on the ground floor she gave up to Kostomarow, and to Ewald was given a pleasant little chamber under the gable roof, from the window of which he had a delightful view over the village and across the green valley to where the proud towers of Castle Buchwald rose above the elms and oaks of its surrounding park.

While the Russian was making his toilet, he had a short but very earnest conversation with the master of the house, and the result of their conference was that Werner gave his visitor a solemn promise that no one at the Castle, and as far as possible no one in the village, should learn of his guests' presence.

"And how about that old dragon, your housekeeper?" asked Kostomarow; "she has given me several vicious glances already, and I fear that her displeasure at our arrival will lead her to discuss this unexpected visit with her neighbors."

The pastor quieted his fear in that direction with a smile.

"She's a little cross sometimes, I must confess, but true as steel, and when necessity requires it, as silent as the grave. You are in no danger from her."

"Very well, then. So much the better. I hope to be able very soon to throw aside all mystery and concealment."

"I'm sure it's very much to be desired, for I'm frank enough to say to you that it is exceedingly disagreeable to me."

"But you will acknowledge that I am right, my young friend. You will acknowledge that I am right before three days have passed. And you will, from the bottom of your heart, ask my pardon for every doubt and sus-

pcion which you may now be tempted to entertain concerning the nature of my intentions."

Soon after, the old man left the house, telling no one whither he was going. The two friends settled themselves for a long talk, and Werner listened with rapt attention to all Ewald had to tell concerning his experiences in the last four years ; although he touched but lightly and modestly upon his own achievements, Werner understood enough to make his heart rejoice over the young musician's success, and to sympathize with Kostomarow's evident pride and satisfaction.

The pastor was called away about noon to attend to some parish duties, and Ewald could no longer withstand the temptation to go for a walk in the surrounding country. It was not for the first time that he set out from the little village, and he felt, in honor bound, to avoid Castle Buchwald to-day as he had done before. The longing to see his father and sisters was strong upon him, but to resist temptation was no new thing in his young life, and with his determination and moral force no hard matter either.

He knew every step of the way to the meadow where his first heart's joy with its bitter after-accompaniment had come to him. It was skirted with the dark green wood which he remembered so well and which marked for him the way now ; all appeared to him the same as on that never-to-be-forgotten day. The wood and the meadow, the murmuring brook and the cloudless blue heavens above them all. Nothing changed in all the long time, and he threw himself down in the long grass to dream again that sweet dream, the memory of which was ever in his soul.

But to-day bitterness and heartache mixed themselves in this old dream of the beautiful, wild, outspoken child who had sat so contentedly by his side ; and he saw in

her stead the lovely but haughty and aristocratic woman of the world, who had received him with much outward amiability and politeness, but perhaps made merry in her heart over his awkwardness of expression and ardent feelings. He saw her again promenading the long salon on Hardenegg's arm, he saw her blush, heard her silvery laugh, and it almost seemed to him as if his deep love was turned to hate.

But he had not patience to remain long on his soft green carpet. He sprang to his feet and looked for some path which would lead him in an opposite direction from Buchwald.

He had been wandering about for half an hour in this peaceful and silent country, when he was suddenly aroused from his dreams by the sound of horses' hoofs. The woodland path was narrow and he must step aside under the trees to allow the riders to pass. It was an elegant two seated brougham drawn by noble looking trotting horses. Behind the servant, who sat like an automaton upon the box, was a slender looking young woman, clothed in black. Ewald did not look at her face, so did not recognize her. But suddenly he heard a low cry of astonishment as the carriage passed him, and then his own name was called in a clear, distinct voice.

Hastily turning, he saw the stiff coachman draw up his horses at his mistress' command, and almost before he could tell who she was, she had sprung from her high seat to the ground. She gave the man an order which Ewald did not understand; then she came with quick step across the moss to meet him, looking in her dark gown as tender, graceful and girlish as he had ever pictured her. Confused, embarrassed and withal unable to conceal his happiness, Ewald took off his hat. Hertha exchanged her long leather riding whip to the left hand, and extended her right as to an old friend.

“I am delighted to see you, although this is the second time you have essayed to slip off without a word of greeting. For your own credit I will assume that it was not accident which brought you to the road leading to my father’s house at Lankenau.”

This time—and the certainty was bliss to Ewald—there was nothing conventional or stilted in the heartiness of her greeting. Only a few minutes ago that he had been nursing angry and bitter feelings towards her; but now her bewitching smile had cast them to the four winds.

“If it was an accident, Countess,” he said, taking her soft, white hand in his, “it was of a kind which heaven very seldom accords. I had no presentiment that such good fortune was in store for me, and here you are before me in the twinkling of an eye, giving me no time even to express my gratitude for your presence.”

She gave him a roguish glance.

“A ready compliment of good Parisian fashion—is it not?”

“It would grieve me greatly, if I thought you doubted my sincerity, Countess.”

“Shall I not repay you in your own coin? Will you deny that you were not convinced of my sincerity when we met the other night at Count Hardenstein’s?”

“Do you mean that I—that you—”

“All I mean to say is this, that you would make a very bad diplomat. One can easily read in your face when your feelings and your words contradict each other. But you shall see that I am not angry with you. I should have been courageous enough to tell you honestly that in the midst of a company of hundreds of curious, scandal-loving and more or less ill-disposed mortals, one cannot be so unconstrained and easy in their intercourse with friends as they may desire. A little

hypocrisy is almost unavoidable, when there are more than two together. Here there is no one but the spectre of the wood, and I know from experience one has nothing to fear from his surveillance."

Her sweet, simple talk, was like fairy music in the ears of her young and ardent companion. His heart was aflame again with a bold and lofty hope,—a hope which encompassed in its magic circle all the joys of earth and a foretaste of the bliss of heaven. In his noble and generous enthusiasm it seemed to him that the cool and balmy forest air which he was drinking in deep draughts, must lend him courage and power to overcome all the obstacles which stood defiantly between him and the realization of his daring dream.

"Do you know, Countess," he said, smiling, "that you seem to me to be nearer a wood sprite than a mortal. You have the refreshing naturalness of a child, and yet you are so wise with it all, that you are able to read the secrets hidden in the depths of a man's heart. You remind me of the fay and the good spirit in the legend of the Sunday child, and my only fear is that you will vanish from my sight after a similar fashion."

She gave him no answer, perhaps he had expected none. But the pause in their conversation did not oppress her. Her heart and her eyes maintained with his the while an eloquent dialogue as she trod the sunlit mossy ground by his side.

"Tell me some of your experiences during the last four years," she said softly, after a time. "I should like to hear how you prospered and how you finally attained that for which you strove."

And Ewald related without embarrassment what he thought would interest her. Though the four years had been outwardly barren as regarded any startling events, yet they had contained for him a world of conflict and

hope, of work and renunciation, and the young musician was astonished at his own command of language in relating all this so readily and unhesitatingly. Never in his whole life had his speech been so warm and earnest as in this hour, and perhaps Countess Hertha Bassewitz had never before listened to any one with such thoughtful and undivided attention. Neither of them noticed the way which they had taken, until they came to a bend in their narrow path which showed them the valley far beneath them and the meadow-land stretching away to their left. They both looked at one another, and Hertha gave a surprised laugh as she gazed at the bright, glorious landscape. Then they turned with one accord toward that spot which was fraught with such significant memories for them both.

They stood on the edge of the little clear, chattering brook, and Hertha said, looking over at the little grassy mound on the other side: "Do you recognize the spot? Let us cross and rest there."

A few brown stones peeping above the surface of the water seemed to offer a safe and convenient crossing. Ewald sprang gallantly into the shallow stream which scarcely rose above his ankles, and reached out his hand to steady Hertha as she stepped from stone to stone. Whether she was confused by the warm pressure of his hand or by his ardent glances, or whatever the reason may have been, her foot slipped from its slimy hold and she would have fallen had she not hastily thrown her arm around her companion's neck.

The pressure of that soft and clinging arm dispelled in an instant all Ewald's timorous reserve. He clasped her in his arms in a tumult of exultation and delight: "Hertha, my darling Hertha!" he whispered, while his lips almost touched her blooming cheek. Unresistingly

MARGUERITE GAZED WITH PROUD DELIGHT ON HER FATHER'S WORK.—See Page 269.



she permitted herself to be borne across the brook to the grassy mound on the other side.

He did not, however, take his arms from around her, for he almost seemed to fear she would dissolve into thin air, as had the woodland sprite in the legend. Again and again he called her by her name. And she did not say him nay. Her lovely, glowing face rested on his shoulder, and he could feel the quick pulsations of her heart, as he looked into the depths of those eyes which now bespoke a world of love, devotion and happiness.

The old clock in the church tower of Frauensee had struck several quarters before this world-forgetting pair aroused themselves from their blissful dream. When its tones finally attracted Hertha's attention she sprang up hastily: "Oh, my poor, dear father is waiting for me! I gave the coachman orders to wait for me at a certain place by the woods, and he will surely believe that I have fallen into the hands of a band of robbers. And I won't be able to look him in the face, all on your account, you bad man!"

Ewald was very anxious to accompany her to the carriage, but she forbade him very decidedly.

"Then I should be an hour or two longer reaching it," she said. "No, no, I will go alone; 'tis but a short distance, and I know my way well."

"And when shall we see one another again?"

"When? Why, will you not come to us? I cannot deceive my dear, good father. I can have no secret from him."

"Do you believe that he will consent, Hertha?—I am only a poor, bürger violinist?"

She laughed, for that fact did not seem to weigh heavily on her soul.

"Ah, my brave knight, that is now your affair! That

my heart belongs to you, I have betrayed in a moment of foolish weakness, and you must obtain my hand by either playing or fighting, as circumstances dictate. You have certainly proved that you have courage, and I will do what I can to help you."

"In the consciousness of your love I shall be strong enough to battle with the whole world. One sacrifice I must demand of you. For the next three days at least our happiness must remain a secret between ourselves. I am staying with the pastor of Frauensee who is a dear friend of mine, and the family at Castle Buchwald must not learn that I am in the neighborhood. I am asking nothing wrong of you, my sweet love, you may be sure of that; only have entire confidence in me. In a few days you will know all; then I will go to your father with all openness. Will you promise me to be silent for so long?"

"It won't be easy for me; but I see already, you terrible man, that I shall be obliged to do what you tell me!"

"But of course we must see each other before then; some time to-morrow. And where, dearest, where shall it be?"

"I do not know. It is not impossible that I may be here to-morrow at this hour, gazing into this charming stream and thinking of the narrow escape I had from finding a watery grave there to-day," she said, laughing. "This is not an invitation for a rendezvous, my dear sir! I do not expect to find you here—do you understand, I do not expect to find you!"

As she said the last words she turned to go. Ewald would have detained her yet a moment longer, but she was quicker than he. Turning to look back she threw him a kiss, and a second later had disappeared like a flash of light between the dark green branches of the trees.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Hardenegg found his mother in an apparently very weak and suffering condition. She received him lying on a couch, and feebly motioned him towards her as he entered the room.

“How good it is to see you again, my son!” she said. “Ah, it has been so frightfully lonely for me here, everything seems so barren and empty. You can never know how much sorrow and heartache I have endured since I came back!”

“What’s that, mother! I trust that since your return no one has failed in showing you the respect and honor which is your due?”

The old baroness shook her head with a pained smile.

“It is not that: You cannot believe, Kurt, that I could have any intercourse with this painter family. But no matter how strenuously I strive to seclude myself in my quiet rooms from all contamination from without, I cannot prevent it forcing itself upon me and robbing me of all peace and rest!”

“You speak rather enigmatically, dear mother. What is it that is really forcing itself upon you? Have you heard or seen anything new concerning—” he stammered—“concerning the conduct of my wife?”

“I? Do you mean that I have been following after your wife like a spy? No, I have scarcely been face to face with her once a day, and I should not have known the slightest thing about her comings and goings, had they not become a subject of jest among the servants of your household.”

“Mother!”

“Yes, my son. I should be doing you an ill service if I did not open your eyes to that which is bringing the honor of your name into open scorn among the stupid gossips and peasants on your own land. And you will perhaps be less deeply wounded to learn from your mother’s lips what may be brutally flung in your face before another day passes over you.”

“But, my God, what is it? You speak as though Elfriede had been guilty of some terrible crime!”

“You are not capable of understanding her. You certainly married her because you loved her, and it is not your fault if she had other reasons for becoming your wife.”

“Mother, I must beg you to stick to facts. Whether or not my wife loved me at the time of our marriage is a question which she alone can answer, and is quite outside of any knowledge you may possess.”

The baroness raised herself from her recumbent position. Her son’s remonstrance effected an instantaneous change in the invalid, and her voice had a harsh, sharp sound, as she answered :

“Are you really yet in a state of uncertainty? I am truly sorry that I shall have to disturb that touching frenzy of yours concerning the affection which the painter’s daughter feels for you. A glance at this letter may enlighten you as to the value of your illusion.”

She drew from the pocket of her elaborate morning gown a small folded sheet of paper which she handed to him. The Baron von Hardenegg took it hesitatingly, and before even glancing at it he asked : “What kind of a letter is this, mamma? Who has written to you?”

“It is not directed to me, but to your wife!”

“And how did it come in your possession? I cannot believe that you obtained it by any wrong means.”

“Your wife evidently placed little value on its con-

tents. At any rate it was found by one of the curious grooms, and had perhaps gone the rounds of the servants' hall before it fell into the hands of my maid, who, as luck would have it, is an honest and reliable person, and considered it her duty to give it to me."

"It seems to me that it would have been her duty to give it to the person to whom it was addressed. The whole affair is scandalous, and I will turn the whole rag, tag and bobtail out of my house."

"In order that they may carry the scandal out into the world? You have not always exhibited such tender feeling for your wife!"

Hardenegg held the letter in his hand, but he could not make up his mind to read it. He rose from his seat by his mother's side and paced the floor, evidently battling with himself.

"This manner of obtaining possession of another's secret is repulsive to my whole soul," he said. "I do wish, mother, you had not mentioned this letter."

"I should not have brought it to your notice had I not realized that my further communications would be doubted without this convincing proof."

"All on my account, then!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "But I cannot longer endure such insinuations and veiled accusations."

He opened the letter hastily after glancing at the address, and then read every word carefully from first to last.

It was the one which John Werner had written to Elfriede Stiller the morning of her betrothal to Hardenegg, and which had influenced her to accept him. The Baroness had not deemed it necessary to explain to her son how her "honest and reliable" maid had come into possession of this old letter, well knowing that after

its perusal his conscientious scruples would trouble him no more.

His jealous distrust of Elfriede had taken deep root in his heart long ago. And here was the written proof of the young clergyman's feelings towards her. He had been right then in his assumption that Werner was his rival—and he felt that he was being forced by them to carry out his own and his mother's schemes.

The hot blood mounted to his forehead as he read this dignified and yet pathetic leave-taking, and his mother's sneering comment echoed for hours in his ears: "You were accepted for your money, and this self-conscious and insolent person's magnanimous renunciation is all that saved you from wearing the willow!"

He crushed the letter in his clenched hand as he finished its second reading.

"The vile wretch!" he muttered between his closed teeth. "And the hypocrite had the face to bless our marriage; and to brazenly sit, with his sanctimonious air at our wedding feast. Oh, that I had struck him in the face at the altar, or pitched him from the balcony when I surprised him at his rendezvous with my wife on our wedding night."

His mother deemed it wisest not to interrupt his first angry outbreak, but her eyes glistened beneath their half-closed lids. How fortunate had been the accident which disclosed to her in almost the first hour of her arrival her enemy's secret; she had anticipated a much harder struggle to win her son from his allegiance to his wife, but everything seemed to play into her hands. Patiently she waited for question or speech from him, for she was not quite sure of her ground even now, and felt that any untoward utterance might yet spoil all. But she did not have long to wait. The Baron thrust the crumpled letter into his pocket, stood staring for a

minute or two vacantly into the park, and then turned again with an almost fierce motion to his mother.

“But this is not all! You said just now that you only gave me the letter in order to convince me that your further communications were reliable. Why do you keep me waiting so long for these ‘further communications’? Of what sins do you accuse Elfriede? And why am I held up to scorn by the peasantry on account of her ‘comings and goings’?”

“You should not allow yourself to become so excited, my dear son! Delicate and painful matters such as this, need to be considered and acted upon with deliberation and in cold blood. I shall not have the courage to say more if you do not hold yourself well in hand.”

“But all this mummery and preamble nearly drives me crazy. Out with it, mother! I am ready to listen quietly to anything now!”

“Very well! Your wife has secret meetings, day after day, with Pastor Werner, and when she starts down alone toward Frauensee, sometimes at nine o’clock in the evening, occasionally an hour earlier, the servants smile significantly at one another, and gossip among themselves. Yes, and all the people round about here know where their place of meeting is. Not at the parsonage—oh no, the worthy parson is too cautious for that—but in the isolated little house behind the mill dam, where the day laborer Karston lives. That is the place which they have selected for their meetings! And your servants have watched Frauensee’s pastor and my son’s wife go in that hut together and sometimes not leave it again until after eleven o’clock.”

This time the Baron did not ask his mother from whence her information had come. It was too circumstantial to be a light accusation. His mother had

nothing more to tell him, but she had made what few moves she had with skill, and her son had taken for Gospel this account of his wife's deception—perhaps guilt—although he would have repelled it with contempt a few short weeks ago. All his anger and passion were gone, but in his face was a vindictive calm not pleasant to look upon. Without meeting his mother's eye he said: "This is naturally the end of it! I shall now know what steps to take."

"What are you going to do, Kurt? If an open scandal cannot be avoided it must at least be circumscribed as far as possible. I beseech you to do nothing of which you will repent."

"Don't be alarmed. A clergyman won't fight; not that I think that hypocrite worthy of powder and shot. But I'll give myself the pleasure of being present at their next meeting in the old mill house, and giving them a little surprise. That'll be the shortest way to let them know I'm not blind, and to end the matter, and I'll have the satisfaction at least of tearing the mask from the face of this saint."

"I hardly know, Kurt, whether that will be the best—"
He interrupted her sharply and rudely.

"What's to be done now is my affair and no one's else. And I shall appreciate it, mother, if you'll not meddle with it. It's not agreeable to a man to canvass the length and breadth of such a thing even with his own mother."

The Baroness pressed her handkerchief to her eyes, and sank back upon her pillows apparently deeply wounded.

"I know full well that the bearer of ill tidings must always feel the lash," she said in a weak voice. "But for the sake of your future happiness I am willing to endure much."

The words "future happiness" brought Hertha von Bassewitz back to Hardenegg's mind, and it came to him suddenly that his mother's thoughts were also of her. Under any circumstances he knew he could count upon her earnest support, and he admitted to himself that in order to win the race for which he had decided to book himself, he would have need of all the assistance which she could render. It was with a feeling of deep and heartfelt thankfulness that he took her slender, fragile hand in his and kissed it tenderly, while he murmured a few loving words in order to dissipate the impression which his rough ones had caused. Then when he saw, by her softened expression, that his peace was made, he left her.

But another dark and threatening cloud hung over his head, from whose destructive power he could alone be saved by the good offices of the sister of that wife whose ruin he had just been compassing in his mother's boudoir.

CHAPTER XIX.

Marguerite had avoided seeing her sister alone on the day following her agitating interview with Hardenegg. She felt that her last night's decision still stood upon a weak foundation, and that she would have little strength just at present to withstand Elfriede's tender appeals. For one moment she had thought to tell Hardenegg at once of her determination, but her wish to retain her freedom until the last moment decided her to be silent.

Then she must immediately acquaint her father with the offer which she had received. Marguerite knew well

that he would not attempt to influence her one way or the other, but she felt it her duty to talk the matter over with him.

So she waited for the moment when he—as was his wont soon after breakfast—should slip from the room and start out for his solitary daily walk, which must have been an extended one, for he very seldom appeared again until the close of the day. Balthasar Stiller was by no means agreeably surprised when, just as he reached the entrance to the park, his youngest daughter suddenly took his arm and begged permission to accompany him in his walk. At first he suggested several reasons why she had better not do so, but when he finally saw that she was determined to bear him company, he accepted her decision with his usual light-heartedness.

“Very well,” he said, “I will take you with me. But beforehand you must promise me to be silent. You are the first one who will learn my secret.”

“Your secret, papa? So your rambles have a definite purpose?”

“Certainly. Did you believe that I was such a thief of the day as to wander aimlessly about for hours? Oh, you shall see wonderful things, my child, things which will make you open your eyes in astonishment! But I will never forgive you if you betray me.”

Marguerite doubted not but what she had stumbled on one of her father’s harmless eccentricities, for he had nourished many of them in his day; but a feeling of uneasiness came over her when he suddenly plunged into the depths of the royal forest.

“Where are we going, papa?” she asked, gently. “Is it absolutely necessary to take this way?”

The old man laughed at her query.

“Absolutely necessary, you curious daughter of Eve! But you need have no fear. I am quite at home here.”

“Perhaps you are going to the—to the—”

“Well. You evidently find it hard to speak out, and I see that I must appease your curiosity. Yes, I am going to head-forester Reinach’s, my friend who saved my life, and who is the truest man that ever wore a green hunting-jacket. But what is it, my child? Are you regretting already that you decided to accompany me?”

At the remembrance of Reinach, Marguerite had suddenly stood still, and her indecision as to whether she would or would not go farther, was visible in her face.

“It hardly seems the thing to follow you to the house of a stranger, father,” she said, hesitatingly, while a treacherous blush flew to her cheeks. “What would the forester think?”

“As I know him well, he would not take great offense at it; but your concern is superfluous, my child. Reinach is never at home at this hour, and if you wish it, he shall never hear a word of your visit.”

Marguerite saw that if she refused to go on now, after having insisted at the outset, her father would think her very childish. She could not tell him her real reasons for not wishing to meet Reinach, so she went on without further comment. Although she had started out with the express intention of telling her father about Rhoden’s proposal, she found she could not open her lips on the subject after Reinach’s name was brought up. The memory of their few meetings was as fresh in her mind as ever. His face, his glance, yes, even the tones of his voice she recalled distinctly, and the more she thought of him the harder grew the sacrifice which she was about to make for her sister’s sake.

So they reached the head-forester's home without any mention having been made of Baron Rhoden and his offer. Marguerite was beginning to know her own heart, and her breath came quickly as she followed her father up the steep wooden steps whose balustrade was completely hidden by the climbing oak-fern. Balthasar Stiller seemed even more at home here than he had in the wood, for he contented himself with simply nodding kindly to the lad who came to meet him, and then he opened a door on the first floor with a key which he took from his pocket. Marguerite need only cast one glance around the large room to know the nature of the secret which the historical painter was guarding so jealously. What she saw before her was a roomy studio, with home-like and artistic appointments, while the stuffed birds, animals' heads and antlers which adorned the walls, bespoke the forest home.

"See, my dear child!" exclaimed the old man, looking around the room with delight, "this is my sanctuary, and the temple of friendship which this unsurpassable man has shared with me. Here have I found that one is never too old to learn something new, and I shall yet win a great name for Balthasar Stiller."

Marguerite listened with but half an ear to his words. She scarcely ventured to look around, for at any moment she might hear Herr Reinach's step upon the stair. But as the house remained perfectly quiet, she at length found courage to cross the room at her father's invitation, and look at the work which he, with great care, was just uncovering. And what she saw there astonished her beyond measure.

"Is it possible, father?" she cried. "Are you painting this picture?"

The old man smiled half sorrowfully, although he was flattered.

“The question does not surprise me,” he answered, “for I am very well satisfied with my new departure. Yes, that is the work of my own hand. I have thrown the ideal of my life to the four winds, and on the threshold of old age have turned me to new gods. I pray the old ones may not revenge themselves upon me.”

The picture was a quiet landscape, only a forest scene, but it told of a master's touch. It was a lonely lake, upon whose glassy surface the dark, over-hanging branches and still darker trees in the background cast their gloomy shadows, while the sun's rays gleaming faintly through the lofty boughs, lit up the picture; it was, in fact, the very sheet of water with which the painter had made such a melancholy acquaintance but a few weeks before. The details were Stiller's own imaginings, and he had caught the poetical and romantic spirit of oppressive solitude just as it had overpowered him on that never-to-be-forgotten day. He had succeeded beyond compare in transferring it all to his canvas.

While Marguerite gazed with proud delight and childish surprise at her father's work, he stood behind her with beaming countenance, and chattered gaily about this, the first secret he had ever kept.

“It is the creation of my own hands,” he said, “but I could not truly call it the child of my soul. I began again on the old subjects, feeling that I must accomplish some great work this time, or failure would be the grave of all my artist's longings. Again the fantastic visions of earlier days floated before me, and I sketched and drew until the sweat dropped from my brow; but my hand had lost its cunning and I could do nothing. The storms of life had not passed over me for naught; they had taken from me my powers of conception. I had given of my best to my one ideal, and now, it too

had flown. And I think I should have died in despair, had not my vigilant, honest friend, been once more my rescuer. Day after day he came here and placed himself behind me in order to be assured of the progress of my work, and though he said nothing regarding it for a long time, yet I knew that it was the eye of a friend which watched my progress, and what was better still, that his heart was in my work. One day he laid his hand quietly on my arm, and said: 'Why do you expend so much pains and talent upon the unintelligible and indescribable? Why do you strive to give form to the unearthly? for no painter, living or dead, has ever been able to picture what eye hath not seen, but I can see that you have a master's talent in another direction. Just look at this sketch of a meadow, with that clump of trees to the left; you have done it hastily because you considered it a trifling subject, but it is the best of all your paintings. I am only a dilettante myself, and meddle a little in several arts; but my unbiased judgment is that if you take your heavenly figures off your easel and put your landscapes in their place, that soon you will have all the world in ecstasies over your work!' I don't know how it was, but his words made a powerful impression on me, perhaps because he had saved my life, or perhaps because they had an earnest, almost prophetic sound. But on that self-same day I made my sketch, and began to paint next morning. The head-forester thinks it good, and I mean to make it so; for it is to him I am indebted, no matter what I accomplish!"

Marguerite had only heard a part of her father's monologue, for her mind was not free enough to-day from the destiny that seemed hanging over her, to follow for any length of time another train of thought. But she realized that all which had been said was in glowing

praise of Reinach, and though on a former occasion she had thought her father's praise exaggerated, she was now assured that his kindness to the old man was but a characteristic of his noble nature. Again a feeling of sorrow came over her that she had never been able to explain to him her conduct in the ball-room. Reinach was now her avowed enemy; he had displayed, with almost insulting frankness, his feelings towards her, and her pride made her long to contradict her father's eulogies. But she could find neither words nor heart for such contradiction, when she saw how happy it made him to do honor to his friend's noble qualities.

While the painter was making ready to begin his day's work, Marguerite went around the studio, apparently inspecting the many pictures and curios with which it was adorned, but in reality striving to gain courage to tell her father of the proposal which had come to her through her brother-in-law on the previous night. Carelessly she turned the leaves of a small sketch book which lay on the table, thinking it was her father's, and paying little attention to its contents. One page however drew from her a murmur of surprise, for she could not doubt that she was the young, slender girl, who was represented in this sketch as riding on a fine horse through a narrow forest path, with head turned a little to one side, as she bent forward, and a look of eager interest on her lovely face.

"Well, papa, you have done me great honor!" she said, as she took the book to her father. "I did not know you were such a flatterer!"

He looked at the drawing and shook his gray head.

"You have come to the wrong address, my child! I am innocent of this offence, and if you have any complaint to make you must go to the owner of the sketch-book!"

The color deepened perceptibly in Marguerite's face.

"No, it is not possible ! You do not mean to say that the head-forester drew this ?"

"Certainly. Who else was there to do it ? Although I confess I am a little astonished, for I don't remember that he has ever spoken of you."

Marguerite took the book hastily, and put it back in its place on the table. And nothing in the world could have induced her just then to tell her father of her coming betrothal to Rhoden.

"It is high time for me to be going," she said hurriedly, endeavoring to hide her embarrassment, "when I begin to rummage through others' possessions. Remember, you are not to mention to Herr Reinach that I was here, father. One secret to balance another, you know."

He assured her that he would keep his own counsel, and Marguerite hastened to leave the forest-house. But she did not breathe freely until she was walking swiftly beneath the dark trees, every step taking her farther from Reinach's home. She soon felt secure from discovery, and from any mortifying meeting with him. She had plunged hurriedly into the forest, and in her haste and disquietude had not noticed in which direction she had gone. Suddenly she halted, realizing that she had lost her way.

At that moment the loud bark of dogs sounded in her ear ; then she recognized the shrill, quick whistle with which Rhoden was accustomed to call his hounds, and she remained standing, uncertain which way to go in order to escape meeting him. The dogs were coming nearer, and quickly, too ; she knew that by their yelps. There was a crackling and breaking of the light underbrush, and she heard distinctly the mournful, complaining moan of a wounded or pursued animal. Scarcely

twenty feet from her a graceful roe appeared, running through the low bushes seeking a retreat. Its slender frame and small limbs, and the white flecks upon the red-brown skin, told that it was a young animal, and for that very reason it was unable to escape from the blood-thirsty brutes which were on its track. Yelping, with glittering eyes and hanging tongue, one of Rhoden's great hounds was close upon its victim, and with a cry which pity and anger forced from her, Marguerite saw the huge animal give a fearful spring and bring the tortured roe to the ground. But the punishment was quicker than the crime. Before the dog could get its cruel teeth in the neck of the sad-eyed creature, a shot echoed through the woods, followed by a piercing howl. The hound released its victim from its clutches, and rushed, half mad with pain, back again a few yards into the forest.

Marguerite stood breathlessly watching this little woodland tragedy, regardless of her own desire to escape notice. Now she hastened toward the hunted roe in order to see for herself whether it needed help or not. She had often caressed the Baron's magnificent hunting dog, but after the scene which she had just witnessed, she felt a positive aversion for it, and felt no compunctions for its sufferings.

She bent tenderly over the moaning creature, and strove to raise it to its legs, but one of them had evidently been broken, and she also noticed a wound on its head. She laid her cheek caressingly against its soft skin, and in her sympathy entirely forgot her wish to remain in concealment.

Behind her she heard a loud, angry voice, which she knew full well. Rhoden had come in order to call the slayer of his dog to account, and he had already found him, for in answer to his violent, excited words, Mar-

guerite heard a quiet, earnest, manly voice, which she immediately recognized as belonging to the head-forester.

Without considering what might follow, she rose impulsively from her kneeling posture, and a second later was by Reinach's side.

"You have no right to complain, Baron Rhoden," she said, standing with flashing eyes in front of the startled men. "If I had been able to kill the dog, I should have done it without hesitation. You have yourself to thank for having lost him."

The Baron, who was in his riding suit, and who must have sprung from his horse at the sound of the shot, stared at the speaker without answering a word. His excitement had been too great to permit him to recover his wonted polite demeanor at once.

"Before such an opponent I must for the moment lay down my arms," he said at last, with a slight bow to Marguerite. "And we can find another opportunity, Herr Forester, to settle our difficulty. I hope that the heroism which induced you to shoot a dog in ambush, is not the extent of your personal bravery."

"If you say that with the object of provoking a duel, I will declare to you at once that I never consider the carrying out of my official duties a matter for which I must account to an offender. I represent here the authority of the law, and I would but cast opprobrium upon it, if, after the manner of the middle ages, I gave satisfaction to the first comer who demanded it, as an apology for having done my duty!"

While speaking, he had leaned upon his fowling-piece and looked the Baron steadily in the face. Marguerite watched him with admiring wonder, and felt how superior he was in his earnest, self-conscious manhood, to the man who stood opposite him. Rhoden's deep, unbridled

fury received a fresh lash from the cool, measured reproof. A wild, excited fire glowed in his eyes, and the muscles of his body were twitched and contorted like a tiger's ready to spring on its prey. Yet he answered nothing, and Reinach, with a slight, contemptuous motion, shouldered his gun and turned away. The Baron had evidently waited for this moment. Seizing his riding whip by the end, he raised his right arm to rush after the retreating man and give him a blow with its heavy silver handle. The forester was not expecting an attack from behind, and would have undoubtedly lost hold of his weapon and perhaps been felled to the ground by the blow, had not Marguerite averted the threatened danger. She had seen the Baron's dastardly motion, and had recognized its object. Regardless of her relations toward Rhoden, and without thought of any possible consequence, she threw herself with raised arm between the two men, and with an expression of the deepest contempt, called to Rhoden: "What you are doing is pusillanimous and cowardly!"

Only a fraction of a second had passed, and here she was shielding a stranger from the man whom within the last few hours she had taught herself to look upon as her future husband.

The forester had turned round at the sound of Marguerite's voice; he pushed his defender gently aside, and before she could realize what had happened, had the Baron by the throat and had forced him to the ground.

"On your knees, you cowardly knave!" he thundered, while the angry blood colored his face. "You may thank this lady for it that I don't thrash you with your own riding whip. But have a care if you ever cross my path again."

He loosed his hold and stepped back a few paces. The Baron's face as he rose was deadly white, and his

features were distorted. He did not, however, attempt to avenge on the spot the insult which he had received. Reinach could bring his gun into play with a single move, and Rhoden saw that the man's physical strength was superior to his own even without the advantage of the weapon. Not glancing towards his enemy, he went to the place where the body of his dog lay. He bent over it, and when he saw that the last breath had left its body, he kicked the carcass away with his foot.

Then picking up his whip he turned in the direction where he had left his horse, and he was yet within hearing of the two others when he laughed aloud, and said, spitefully: "And I had really had it in my mind to make a game-keeper's sweetheart my Baroness."

Reinach started forward as if to hasten after him, but a little hand was laid firmly on his arm to detain him. Marguerite spoke no word, but she gave him a beseeching glance which he could not withstand, so he let the insulting speech pass unnoticed. But he took the little hand and raised it reverently to his lips.

"I had never dreamed that I should ever find it necessary to thank a lady for such a service," he said. "But I will never forgive myself, my dear Fräulein, for having placed you, even unconsciously, in so painful a position."

And now the knowledge of what she had done, and the inevitable consequences, came over her with full force. All thought of an engagement with Rhoden was at an end, and it was more than probable that, under the circumstances, he would leave Buchwald at once. The feeling that was uppermost in her heart at this moment was one of indescribable relief and joy. It seemed as if a friendly hand had lifted a fearful burden from her shoulders, and by a happy accident she had been rescued from a terrible fate. She was in no condition to hide

her joyous feelings from Reinach. A sunny smile played about her lips, and her eyes sparkled as she turned to him to reply to his last words.

"Oh, no. I should say, rather, that you have freed me from a painful position. Why should I deny what you must already know from Baron Rhoden's parting greeting. Now, he'll certainly never think again of making me his wife."

This communication, to which the head-forester should have been altogether indifferent, changed the whole face of nature for him that minute.

"And does this not trouble you?" he asked. "Does not the thought bring you sorrow?"

Their glances met. There was an expectant, half-fearful, questioning look in his eyes, and a charming, roguish expression in hers.

"No, that thought brings me no sorrow, not the slightest," she said, proudly. "I know nothing at this moment which could have happened, pleasanter or more opportune. But, of course, you have no interest in all this, and we can find something better to talk about. Do you see that poor little roe? I believe it has broken its leg."

She kneeled again by the tender, brown-eyed creature, and stroked its soft skin caressingly, while Reinach examined the injured limb.

"It is not broken," he said at last, "and my old Frederick, who is an excellent hand at such things, will bring it all right in a day or two."

It was only by accident that he had taken her hand to assist her to rise, but it was something worthy of note that he still held it as they went on side by side, until they reached his forest home.

And again the girl's heart beat high as she ascended the wooden steps; not this time with timidity or fear, but with great, unspeakable, incomprehensible happiness.

CHAPTER XX.

Although, in consequence of the absence of the master, a quantity of business had accumulated which required Hardenegg's personal attention, he could not bring himself to sit at his desk fifteen minutes at a time. There were so many things which must be decided in the near future—the Baron's wooing, and if it was successful, the consequent ease of mind which relief from his monetary troubles would bring; the accusation and proof against Elfriede; and his growing passion for the beautiful Hertha von Bassewitz, which he could not conceal from himself—all these, and the feeling that he must finally conquer, and then be able to throw aside all care, occupied his every thought. He wanted some distraction to free himself from them, and as he hadn't seen Rhoden all morning, he ordered his fleetest horse to be saddled. A mad desire had come over him, a desire whose gratification he at first considered impracticable, but which gave him no peace.

He knew that Count Bassewitz had arrived at Lanckenau, and that his daughter had accompanied him. Under ordinary circumstances it would scarcely have seemed strange for an acquaintance on an adjoining estate to pay a visit of courtesy. But in this case there were other things to be considered. Count Bassewitz had broken off all intercourse between the two families at the time Hardenegg's engagement to the historical painter's daughter was announced. Notwithstanding his friendly greeting on the day of the races, it was more than possible that the Count would have no desire to return to the old friendly footing. Then again, it was

highly probable that Hardenegg's visit would not be returned at all, and might even be regarded as an impudent intrusion.

He thought of all this, but it was not strong enough to dissuade him from his purpose. After all, they were in the country, and there was no need to be as careful about etiquette as if they were in town. The master of Buchwald took a long ride before he arrived in the neighborhood of the Great House at Lankenau, and the necessity for rest and refreshment would, he thought, be a sufficient excuse for a short visit, and give him a chance to judge of the footing upon which he stood.

After arriving at this determination, Hardenegg turned his horse into a narrow path which ran through the woods immediately surrounding the Count's estate. Coming to an opening in the wood, his interest was suddenly aroused, and his attention fixed.

Diagonally across the green meadow which lay before him, he saw a youthful couple sauntering arm-in-arm. Their heads were suspiciously close together, and it needed no keen eye to discover that they were revelers in love's young dream. These young lovers would have elicited only a passing glance and smile from Hardenegg under other circumstances, but now his pulse beat fast and high; for the young girl who at this very moment was looking tenderly into her lover's face, closely resembled, in figure, bearing, motion, even in her very profile, the Countess Hertha von Bassewitz, and Hardenegg could almost have sworn it was she, had he not been convinced that such a thing was impossible. It would, indeed, be a matter of open laughter, if the aristocratic and proud Count's daughter were seen wandering here beneath the blue heavens, under the very eyes of plowmen and shepherds' lads, with any young man, and she would—but see, she is surely let-

ting him kiss her. The two had certainly kissed one another, of that there was no doubt, and in spite of his conviction that he had never seen them before, this mark of affection touched Hardenegg like a dagger-thrust. Standing upright in his saddle, he bent forward in order to secure a better view, and now—no, truly there was no longer any possible doubt; the lady had turned her face full toward him, and now he knew that it was no counterpart of the Countess upon which he gazed, but the Countess Hertha von Bassewitz in her own person. She had either not recognized the rider, or, in her happy self-forgetfulness, had not seen him at all. But, as if to show her scorn of the passion which tortured the Baron, she laid her head trustfully on the shoulder of her companion, who threw his arm round her slender waist and drew her tenderly to himself. Hardenegg drove the spurs into his horse's flanks, and started off at a furious pace. He was in no condition to bear the sight of this picture longer.

No other disillusion which he could have experienced, would have affected him so sensibly. Hertha von Bassewitz had been the prominent figure in all his projects for the future; and his hatred for the unknown, fortunate wooer, was all the more intense, because he recognized that he could not make the slightest attempt, in his present condition, to thwart this stranger's wishes or plans.

But should he now go on to Lanckenau? The ardent desire to see Hertha again had been the ground of his rash determination. Well, he had seen her, and he had no wish to be a further witness to this idyllic love scene. He had turned his horse's head into a side-path leading in an opposite direction, when a new idea suggested itself to him in his angry agitation. He turned his horse suddenly to the left and rode off at a brisk canter

in the direction of Lankenau. A conjecture, which had for a moment seemed improbable, was now gaining ground in his thoughts. Who knew but what this was some secret, youthful passion of which the Count had no knowledge!

It had not been the custom of the Baron von Hardenegg to yield quietly to another in a love affair; but this time—so he assured himself—it might be his knightly duty to protect the Countess from any farther imprudence.

Count Bassewitz's face bespoke surprise as he saw Hardenegg dismount from his steaming horse. But he was too much a man of the world to betray it to his unlooked-for guest. Hardenegg declared, with an unaffected laugh, that he had been riding for hours, and relying upon the well-known hospitality of Lankenau, had drawn up to crave a drink. The Count greeted him courteously, and soon the two men were seated at a table with a bottle of sparkling wine between them.

They conversed upon many different topics of the day, and Hardenegg waited patiently until an opportune moment arrived for the mention of his host's daughter. At last he asked a careless question regarding her well-being. But before the Count had time to answer it, he continued, laughing: "That's a needless question, however, for, from the glimpse which I had of the Countess half an hour ago, she seemed in excellent health, and perhaps it was my duty to empty my first glass of this most excellent wine to the impending happy event."

Bassewitz gave the speaker an earnest, questioning look.

"You must permit me to say, my dear Hardenegg, that I do not understand you."

The Baron made a slight bow,

“Pardon me. I should not have been so indiscreet. Since it is a secret, I can assure you, no word of mine will betray it.”

“But I really do not understand you, my dear neighbor. I know absolutely nothing about any joyful event which is hanging over our house. Will you be good enough to explain to me what it is, about which you are proffering absolute silence?”

Hardenegg affected a hesitancy about relieving the Count's suspense. Finally he said: “I must say I feel that I deserve a sharp reproof for being so long-tongued. I was nearly spoiling a great surprise which the Countess is evidently preparing for you, so I can only beg you to forget my incautious utterance.”

“Notwithstanding all that, you will earn my sincere thanks if you will explain clearly what it is to which you refer. Does this happy event of which you speak, affect my daughter in any way?”

“It does, indeed! But I greatly fear I will lose her favor if I tell tales out of school.”

“Never mind about that, until it comes. I promise you I will make your peace with her. Doubtless, I know all about it, already.”

“That is more than probable; for I cannot believe that Countess Hertha would otherwise have selected, as the scene of her first, innocent love-making, a treeless meadow, which of course, was open to other eyes than mine.”

Count Bassewitz pushed his chair back a little. His face had grown very earnest, and his voice had a harsh, almost impolite tone as he answered: “You are not quite happy in your jests to-day, Herr von Hardenegg.”

The Baron felt a satisfaction, which, for the moment at least, was stronger than the shame which his wretched rôle must necessarily have engendered.

“Then it is a surprise?” he said reluctantly. “You mustn’t forget, Count, you have promised to be my mediator.”

Bassewitz nearly lost his patience at this. “What the deuce— Can you not see, Herr Baron, that I am not as gaily inclined as yourself? Up to this moment I can understand nothing but that you, with enviable cold bloodedness, are keeping me in suspense regarding something unprecedented.”

The Count’s sudden change of tone made it necessary for Hardenegg to assume a serious bearing.

“I can only repeat my regret that in all innocence I stumbled on a subject which seems painful to you. If you think that what I saw I really regard as unprecedented, pray don’t hold me accountable for it, for I never said so.”

“But in Heaven’s name, what was it you really did see? My daughter has gone riding in her brougham, accompanied by a groom, just as she has done every day since our arrival. What can have happened, then?”

“I saw neither the groom, Herr Baron, nor the carriage. I only saw your daughter walking arm in arm with a black-haired young man to whom she accorded, without resistance, the enviable privilege of kissing her in the open field.”

The scarcely concealed delight with which the Baron brought out his news, after all his parleying, did not escape the Count, who made a pretty correct conjecture as to the true motives which actuated his guest’s revelation. Instead of falling, as Hardenegg had expected, into a violent passion and rushing out at once to investigate this scandalous occurrence, he was strangely calm, and the manner of his reply was by no means flattering to his visitor.

“You had, without doubt, intended to do me a kind-

ness, Herr von Hardenegg, by informing me of the observations which you believe yourself to have made, and in so doing you would have placed me under lasting obligations, were I not unalterably convinced"—and he laid an emphasis on these words which could not be misunderstood—"that you have been the victim of a singular optical delusion. The lady whom you saw with the black-haired young man was not my daughter, could not have been my daughter, and I trust that by this positive assurance all your amiable conjectures in relation to the approaching joyful event in my household, will receive a final and complete refutation."

The Count rose formally as he finished speaking, and Hardenegg was, of course, obliged to follow his example.

His host's contemptuous tone had irritated him to the utmost, but he felt he would only lose ground by any betrayal of his feelings.

"You are altogether right, my dear Count," he said coolly. "I will, from now on, believe that I have been the victim of an optical delusion. Your words have so entirely convinced me."

A minute or two later he was again in the saddle, and never had his faithful, swift-footed horse received such brutal treatment as on that homeward ride of Baron von Hardenegg from his first and last visit to Lankenau.

Not long after his departure, Countess Hertha's light carriage rolled up to the entrance-door, and the young girl sprang gracefully from it. Her beautiful face was bright and beaming, and she hummed a snatch of a gay melody as she hurried to her father's study. On the threshold she held out her arms, laughing, for she was accustomed upon her return, from no matter how short a journey, to receive a tender greeting from him.

To-day, much to her astonishment, her welcome was of quite another kind.

With earnest, almost frowning face, her father went to meet her. After he had closed the door behind her, he took her hand and led her into the middle of the room.

“Where were you riding, Hertha?” he asked severely. Astonished, yet with a shy glance, she looked up at him.

“Through the Buchwald Valley, dear father! Was that a crime?”

“And did you leave your carriage?”

“Yes; but why in the world this cross-examination? Certainly I left it.”

“I trust you are not striving to deceive me. An accusation has been made against you, whose authenticity is at this moment doubtful, for I could not imagine that my child would be guilty of a dishonorable action.”

“And you are quite right, father!” cried the girl, with blazing eyes. “I hope you will always maintain that it is impossible for me to forget my honor. But I see that my accuser has calumniated me, and that I dare not be longer silent, no matter how hard it will be for me to break a solemn promise. Come, dear father, sit down in this chair, and I will kneel at your feet as I do when you tell me of your army adventures. To-day it is my turn to tell of my adventure—and blood was spilled then, too, even if it was only the blood of an ox.”

Half against his will, and with his feeble remonstrance unheeded, the Count listened to his daughter's simple account of her love-affair. Her lovely, glowing face, and the happy confidence which lit her eyes, made it an impossibility for him to interrupt her angrily, even if her confession had been more appalling than it really was. That it was appalling, she could well see from the expression of his countenance.

“My poor, foolish child,” he said, as she finished, “how much suffering you have prepared for us both. You don’t seem to be conscious that this can be only a dream,—the passing fancy of a summer day. Even if I could overlook this artist’s youth, the shortness of your acquaintance, and the romantic circumstances which were doubtless the mainspring of your attachment for one another, I should yet have to decide most positively against this alliance. We not only have obligations toward ourselves, but towards those in our own rank of life, and towards our ancestors, and I know, from my own experience, that the fulfilment of these obligations is sometimes very hard.”

“No, father, you are not in earnest. You cannot wish me to be unhappy, just for the sake of strangers, or for our dead ancestors! Only we two, you and I, have any right to decide about my future fate, and I know that you love me too well to oppose me so cruelly.”

Though she petted and begged and flattered him alternately, she could not move him by a word from the stand which he had taken. It was evident that it was no easy matter for him to destroy all his daughter’s love dreams, but he listened to and obeyed a force which was far stronger than the sway of his own feelings. His kind and affectionate manner made it impossible for her to contend against his mildly-given refusal, but she was far from believing her case hopeless, notwithstanding.

“And will you also forbid me seeing Ewald again?” she asked. “Do you expect that everything shall be over between us from this day on?”

“And is not that the best for us all, Hertha? Future meetings behind my back would, under existing circumstances, bring you little joy, and I should suffer greatly if I were obliged to adopt stringent measures towards you.”

“But what you desire is impossible! I must see Ewald once again, and you must give him the opportunity to speak openly to you. Who knows but what he may succeed in conquering your preconceived opinion!”

Count Bassewitz looked thoughtfully before him for a moment, then said with affectionate earnestness: “Very well, my child. Your wish has a certain warrant. In order that there may be no repetition of to-day’s occurrence, I will write Herr Ewald a note, requesting him to come to me to-morrow, and that will give you an opportunity for a last meeting under my own eyes. I hope you will be my good and clear-sighted little daughter, as you always have been, and ask for no further concession.”

Hertha threw her arms around his neck and kissed him tenderly. But she made him no promises, and when she went to her chamber, her face had by no means the look of a deeply unhappy creature for whom existence had no alluring hopes.

CHAPTER XXI.

It was already dark when Hardenegg again entered Castle Buchwald. His temper was the worst in the world. Count Bassewitz’ last words still echoed in his ears; he had brought this humiliation upon himself unnecessarily, and without profit; that was the worst thought of all.

“Has Baron Rhoden got back yet?” he asked, as he drew his gloves off hastily. The servant did not reply at once, and his master turned on him angrily: “Don’t you understand what I say? Is the Baron in the Castle?”

“No, sir. But the carriage came back empty, from the railway station, half an hour ago.”

“The carriage—from the railway station! What do you mean? What did the carriage go to the railway station for? And what has that to do with the Baron?”

“Everything, sir. The Baron took the evening train for town, and his luggage is to follow in the morning.”

Hardenegg trembled violently, and it was a minute before he could question the man further.

“And do you know what caused this sudden journey?” he asked, trying to speak coolly. “Has the Baron left any message for me?”

“I do not know, sir. But his man, Franz, is still here to look after his luggage. Perhaps some message was left with him.”

“Bring him to me at once—do you hear, at once! Something very important must have occurred.”

A few minutes later, Franz, hastily summoned by the old servant, stood in the doorway.

“His master regretted that he could not wait to take a personal leave of the Baron,” the man announced, “but he gave me orders to place this letter in your own hands.” He said these last words in a significant tone, as if he knew its contents.

Hardenegg said nothing further, and motioned to the young man to leave him. He threw himself on a couch before opening this letter, for he felt that something to be dreaded was coming. But his worst fears were more than realized when he had mastered its contents.

“MY DEAR HARDENEGG: You must seek from your fair sister-in-law the reason for my sudden departure; I will confine myself to the simple statement that it was unavoidable. My suit for the hand of Fräulein Stiller

is withdrawn, and our business relations, which were contingent upon its success, are at an end. You will therefore make your arrangements accordingly, for, in spite of my sincere friendship for you, I shall not be in a position, for reasons which you can understand, to grant you any further indulgence.

With warmest thanks for your hospitality.

HARTMUTH VON RHODEN."

So the game was lost, shamefully lost, through a woman's whim, for the Baron was convinced that it was his own wife who had, in spite of his unequivocal hints as to the consequences, persuaded her sister, in cold blood, to do this thing.

A wild, furious, deadly hatred towards Elfriede and towards her sister, took possession of him, and for the moment banished all other thoughts. He struck his bell excitedly, and when the servant answered it, he shouted :

"Tell my wife that I wish to speak with her! Hurry up; why do you stand staring at me, you imbecile!"

"I beg your pardon, sir; but my lady—"

"Well! What about her?"

He did not attempt to hide from his servant by manner or voice the contempt in which he held the bearer of his name. No humiliation which he could have brought upon her would have seemed to him deep or shameful enough for the wrong she had this day committed against him.

"My lady left the Castle half an hour ago," responded the servant, drawing back as he spoke as far as possible from his master, whose dark, sinister looking face made him indeed look dangerous.

"Ah! And Fräulein Stiller?"

"None of the family are at home, except my lady, your mother."

With the impotent fury of a wild animal in the snare, Hardenegg strode up and down the room.

"Excellent!" he murmured to himself. "Excellent!" Then a sudden idea suggesting itself to him, he turned to the servant: "Perhaps you know where your mistress has gone? The people in this house seem to know everything that is going on."

"The Baroness took the way toward Frauensee, so far as I could see."

"And who was with her?"

"No one, sir."

"That's all right. You can go."

The servant did not hesitate to obey this command with all speed, for his master's face was becoming darker and more passionate every moment.

Hardenegg went to his writing-table and opened a secret drawer, from which he took a glistening revolver. He examined it carefully and saw that it was loaded, but before he had left the table, another thought came to him, and he threw it back with a contemptuous motion into its old place.

"I think what I have to do can be done without the assistance of that weapon!" he said grimly, as he took up his riding whip. "Our accounts will be no less entirely settled."

A couple of curious, spying domestics saw him start, a moment later, in the same direction which his wife had taken an hour or so before.

* * * * *

The poor, wretched hovel of the day-laborer, Karstan, lay at a good distance from the village of Frauensee. The villagers troubled themselves little about the inmates of the tumble-down little dwelling, for Karstan had a bad name.

He had been punished repeatedly as an incorrigible thief, and not without reason did the people avoid him, for he was a hard drinker, and a man of a rough, quarrelsome disposition. For these reasons it is not to be wondered at that he found it impossible to get regular employment, and was glad to do such trifling jobs as came in his way.

And it was this poor, miserable habitation which Pastor Werner and the young Baroness von Hardenegg had, according to the watchful maid's account, selected for their place of rendezvous. They had, in truth, met there every day for a week past, and there they were on this eventful evening, seated in the low, badly-lighted, dirty room, opposite one another. It did not seem to be exactly the place in which to enact a tender love scene. One could scarcely imagine a more depressing or desolate looking room than this. Both Werner and the Baroness had striven to do what they could to improve its appearance and bring a little comfort to its occupants, but the clergyman's means were slight, and the Baroness' resources were even less, and the poor villagers, even had they been so disposed, had hard enough work to make both ends meet, without alms-giving. Elfriede had been able to relieve the poor people a little, however, and had succeeded to some extent in bringing order out of chaos.

The day-laborer crouched in a half-dark corner upon a small stool, and stared stupidly and indifferently before him at the little broken table. What happened around him, did not seem to trouble him at all. He had merely nodded vacantly when Werner told him that he had secured several weeks' steady work for him with farmer Hulmdorf, and when Elfriede entered, he mumbled a few inarticulate words, which she could take for a greeting or not as she chose.

The two visitors had gone immediately, one to each side of a wretched bed, at the foot of which stood the pale, hollow-cheeked wife of the day-laborer. It was a brave, honest woman, against whom no one had a word to say, who had united her fate with that of this incorrigible scamp. She had been a sufferer for years from a hopeless disease, and now the time had come when she could no longer do even the lightest work without pain, but must wait patiently for that day, now close at hand, when all sorrow and suffering should end for her. On the old bed lay a ten-year-old child, whose beautiful face, pressed against the pillow, reminded one of a head of Dürer's—it was a countenance so full of innocence and purity. The long, golden hair fell in two thick braids upon the bed-cover; the thin hands, one of which Elfriede had taken, and the emaciated, white cheeks, told of long days and nights of suffering through which the tender, frail creature had passed.

The child had sunk into a painless dose; the eyelids were closed and cast their long shadows on the pale cheeks, and from time to time a weak, half-dreamy smile played around her lips.

“Yes, my lady,” said the wife, clasping her hands, “this has been the first happy day for me in a long time. When the doctor came this morning and Maria looked up at him, his face showed that he was well satisfied, and after he had examined her, he slapped me on the shoulder, and said: ‘Ah, we are very fortunate to day, for she has turned the sharp corner. With careful attention and nursing, we will have her again as well as a fish in water.’ Ah, gracious lady, I have had many sorrows and trials in my life, and I always thought there were no tears left for me to shed, but when I heard him say that, I cried for joy as I should not have been able to do for grief if she had died.”

"I have noticed how devoted you were to your dear child," answered Elfriede, kindly, "and this verdict from the doctor is very good news to me, also; but I hope, dear Frau Karsten, that when Maria's health is fully restored, you will no longer refuse me your consent to place her somewhere under the protection of good people."

The sick woman put her hand over her eyes, and her breath came with a gasp, as if something in her throat was choking her. After a short silence she said: "No, no, I will no longer object, for perhaps she would not have fallen ill at all had she been raised like other children. It is certainly very hard for me that I cannot detain her, for I know I shall not live without her. But you can't understand how it is when one has to be separated from the only beautiful and good thing that one possesses in the world. It will go hard with me, but I see that it must be, and I shall submit as best I can."

"Calm yourself, good Frau," said Werner, in that gentle and heart-winning tone which the poor and unhappy of his little flock were ever glad to hear. "Though your little daughter, owing to the doctor's positive command, must not remain in this unhealthy house any longer, that is no reason why you should be entirely separated from her. I have been speaking to my housekeeper about Maria, and find that she will gladly take your little one into the parsonage, if you and your husband consent. So long as I am able, I shall look after her bodily and spiritual welfare, and as long as she is with me, my good Frau Karsten, you can visit her at any time you choose."

With a glad look on her face, Elfriede reached her hand across the little bed to him. The poor mother

could not for a moment find words in which to express her overflowing thanks.

“This last is truly the best thing you could do for us, Herr Pastor,” she said, in the harsh and direct manner of people in her station. “If it had not been for you and this good lady, both Maria and I would have been in the church-yard long ago, and I hardly dare think what would have become of my husband. And when will you take the child? Ah, if the Herr Pastor were only the Baron, or the gracious Baroness the pastor’s wife, it would be well for all the poor people in this neighborhood!”

Elfriede rose hurriedly at this moment, perhaps to hide from the clergyman her deeply glowing countenance. Perhaps also to prevent the grateful woman from continuing in the same vein.

“I cannot remain with you any longer this evening, Frau Karsten,” she said, “and our talking would arouse the little one. Early in the morning I will send you, as usual, something nourishing for her.”

In company with Werner, who rose without speaking, she left the little house, while its wretched mistress stood at the door watching them as they went down the narrow path leading to the country road.

“It’s a pity for them both!” she said, shaking her head, as she went back to her child.

Elfriede turned and spoke to Werner as soon as they had gone a few steps. “I cannot thank you enough for looking out for that poor little girl’s future. She has lain like a heavy burden on my heart for some time, and I greatly fear that my husband will soon forbid my visiting the poor people. I notice now that my every step is watched.”

“Why are you watched? Surely there is no wrong in what you are doing!”

“It may seem wrong in the eyes of the dowager Baroness von Hardenegg. You know what her views are regarding the poor of this region, and even though she sympathized with them, she would lose no opportunity to place obstacles in my path. I can no longer doubt that she hates me from the bottom of her heart, and that she will spare no pains to injure me whenever a possibility offers. I do not know what she is planning against my future. Ah, John, I fear it was not only a fatal error, but a great wrong which I committed four years ago, when I consented to this marriage !”

These words sounded to him like a despairing cry wrung from a tortured heart, and to-day he had not the courage to forbid the iniquity, if it were iniquity, of such complainings.

“You did it for your father’s and your sister’s sake, Elfriede,” he said, gently. “Your intentions were good, even though the consequences of your decision have proved that you were in error.”

“No, no, no ! It is useless to strive to extenuate what never, even with the best objects in view, can be extenuated. It is a lie which is revenging itself on me ; for it was surely with a lie on my lips that I went to the altar with a man whom I did not love. A marriage which signifies only a fulfilment of duty is no marriage. I can say with a clear conscience that I have never neglected my duty, and yet I have always felt guilty that I could not give my husband what he had a right to claim—my love. I do not mean to reprove you, for no one could be more fully convinced of the purity of your motives than I. But I am, perhaps, the only being who has ever bitterly rued following your advice.”

A startled look crossed his face. “My advice, Elfriede ? Why, it was your own decision which you followed.”

“No ; but I will tell you now, for we both know our hearts are pure, and another opportunity may never again offer to speak of these sad things. I was not so magnanimous and unselfish as you believe. Even the imaginary paradise which was to be mine for the taking, and my father’s childlike joy, would not have decided me to destroy forever any dream of future happiness which I might possess. I had already decided to turn to you for aid—in another quarter of an hour my whole future would have been in your hands, when—just at the last moment—your letter came, showing that you scorned me, and that you took it for granted that my love for my father would make me accept this offer. What was there for me to do after that ? I had been accustomed to look upon you as the embodiment of all that was just and honorable, and when you advised me—tacitly, I must admit—to do my duty by my father—I felt, for I only had an hour or so in which to decide, that there was nothing for me to do but to yield. Now you know the little which there is to tell concerning my marriage.”

She had stood still while telling her little story, and she would perhaps not have ended it, had she looked but once into the clergyman’s face. He was evidently agitated to his heart’s centre, for these pitiless words threatened to destroy the peace of his conscience, which had always given him strength to bear his sufferings calmly, and to withstand all temptations. With terror, now that the veil was torn from his eyes, he recognized the false conception of duty which, while urging him to cast from him all hopes of happiness for himself, had also led him to draw into the maelstrom this confiding creature who was dearer to him than all else on earth. It seemed as if the ground which he had always considered so secure, had suddenly given way under his

feet, and a heavy burden, for which he was answerable, was cast upon his shoulders.

He would have answered Elfriede, but for the moment could find no words to express his sorrow and self-reproach. Then, when he was about to open his lips, an incident occurred for which neither of them were prepared.

Out from the darkness of the bushes which bordered the path, stepped a tall, manly form. With a low cry Elfriede recognized her husband, whose angry mien and dark, red face told her that this meeting was no accident. With a few quick steps he was beside her, and placed himself directly in front of the clergyman, saying with a loud, contemptuous laugh: "Good evening, confiding souls! I beg your forgiveness for interrupting so abruptly this tender interchange of confidences."

Werner was as confused as if he had really been entrapped in some wrong-doing. His only thought was that the Baron was angry because his wife had been visiting the poor and needy. Elfriede knew, however, that this brutal attack must be ascribed to some deeper cause, and the pride of her insulted womanhood lent her strength.

"You are quite right in apologizing for your sudden appearance," she answered sternly, meeting his furious glance fearlessly. "I am as little inclined to submit to a vile espionage, as longer to endure such shameful treatment."

"Silence, you despicable woman!" thundered the Baron in a shrill, far-sounding voice. "Is it because you are so near your lover that you dare to meet me thus? Let us see if he has the courage to play your protector. You will follow me at once in order to receive the punishment which I shall mete out to you."

And with his left hand he seized her arm with such

violence as drew from her a cry of pain. Werner started forward quickly; but his help would have been of little avail to the threatened woman, had not strong and unexpected succor come to her at this moment.

Two slender arms, whose muscles and sinews appeared to be of steel, released her instantly from Hardenegg's grasp, and before the enraged husband could see who his assailant was, he was thrown several feet from where he had been standing.

"Ewald! My brother Ewald!" cried Elfriede in great surprise, and the youth replied with an excited glance:

"Yes, your brother Ewald, who truly has arrived just in time to put a stop to this damnable coward's assaults. If you attempt to touch her—by the eternal God, I'll nail you to the earth with this knife!"

The dangerous, metallic sparkle of the object which he saw in Ewald's hand may have restored Hardenegg to a quieter frame of mind. Perhaps he thought of a certain night years before, when Ewald, then only a boy, had given no slight proof of his manly courage, or perhaps he wished to take a more deadly revenge against this new enemy in whom he recognized Hertha von Bassewitz' companion of the morning, than was possible at this time and place.

"A worthy set, indeed!" he said, mockingly. "I must really be forgiven for declining to consort with such a rabble any longer. For the last time, Elfriede, I give you the choice of accompanying me from this spot, or of never crossing the threshold of my house again. There is no place under the roof of a Hardenegg for—"

He did not complete the insulting sentence. He had not heard a step behind him, and now, as he raised his head, he thought he saw a ghost, for Kostomarow was

close to him, and he almost believed that the old man had come down before him in the evening mist.

“Go on, Herr von Hardenegg! Why does the conclusion of that charming speech stick in your throat? Perhaps you will allow me to finish it? And mark you well what I shall say: ‘There will no longer be a place under the roof of Buchwald for cheats and thieves, for gamblers and libertines. The reign of knavery is at an end! So pack your trunk, Kurt von Hardenegg, and look well to it, young man, that you take not a pfennig’s worth which does not belong to you.’”

He stood so near to the Baron, and was so defenceless, that it would have been an easy matter for the other to have felled him to the ground with one blow. But Hardenegg never thought of raising his hand against the old man. He pressed his clenched fist against his breast, his breath came thick and heavy, and great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

“You are a senseless liar!” he said, in a thick, agitated voice.

Kostomarow seemed to be pleased with this appellation.

“Before another sun has gone to rest, I shall prove to you that I am neither senseless nor a liar,” he said, in a deep, significant tone. “It had been well for you if the Baron Botho von Hardenegg had disappeared forever from view on the snow-covered wastes of Siberia, instead of his Russian friend, Kostomarow, and it is well for me I have indisputable witnesses to prove my right to the name of Hardenegg and to the inheritance of my father. My brother evidently thought I was dead, and as I had no care for my possessions, I let him believe he was owner of them all, for, although he was frivolous and inconsiderate, he was no knave. The nephew has exhausted the full measure of my patience.

He is not only a thief from necessity and heedlessness, but he is doubly a thief through infamy, and weak, degrading passions. And he will be spurned and branded before the whole world as totally bereft of honor."

There was but one of those who heard these astounding and terrifying words who understood them, but he was in no condition to bear any longer the old man's glance. He trembled violently while listening to this bold and prophetic speech, and when his uncle ceased, he struck his riding whip into the empty air, and replied in a shrill falsetto: "This is as good as a play. The insane claimant! Well, I shall make an end of this crazy comedy. To-morrow I'll know how to settle with you all!"

Then he turned and went rapidly from them, with quick, resounding footsteps, not like those of a defeated man. Soon the darkening night-shadows enveloped his tall form. There was nothing in the manner of his departure to indicate that Kurt von Hardenegg was broken down or humiliated by the accusations which had been made against his honor.

Elfriede leaned against the breast of her newly-returned brother, a man now, whom she had last seen as a boy; and her tearful face was pressed against his shoulder. Kostomarow turned, leaning heavily upon his cane, and came toward the sobbing woman.

"Do not weep, Frau von Hardenegg," he said, in a gentle, courtly manner, which astonished Ewald more than all else which had gone before. "We all know that you are guilty of no wrong, and you need have no further fear from the man who has just left us. You must accompany your brother to the parsonage. Herr Werner and I will seek other quarters for the night. You need have no dread of gossip or slander, for I will

myself be answerable for your honor ; I, the head of the family whose name you bear."

Silently they obeyed their senior's command. They all felt that the next day would be a momentous one in all their lives.

CHAPTER XXII.

With arms hanging listlessly at his side, and head sunk low upon his breast, Hardenegg sat at his writing table in the luxurious library. He had been rummaging and racking his brain for hours and all for nought, and he felt wearied to death. The world seemed too much for him, and a feeling came over him that he must escape from it at all hazards, no matter what awaited him in the darkness beyond. Before him lay a miniature portrait in an old-fashioned narrow frame. He had stared at it for a long time, then thrown it from him, and then, forced by an irresistible impulse, had taken it up again to stare at it anew. The face was that of a handsome, beardless youth—his uncle, Botho von Hardenegg. In vain had Hardenegg sought to discover traces of the slightest resemblance between this boyish countenance and the dark, spectral-looking face of Kostomarow.

"It is impossible!" he said, taking up the miniature once more. "He is a fool or an impostor! There's only one thing to be done with him, either shut him up in an insane asylum, or imprison him!"

But though he repeated this assurance to himself, it brought him neither peace nor relief. Even if this wretched old man lied knowingly, or if he was the victim of an hallucination, and might never succeed in convinc-

ing men of the justness of his claims, yet he would still ruin the Baron, for Hardenegg realized that he was in no position to silence his enemy. His fate was sealed, for the whole world would learn that the Castle, the estates, in fact all the Hardenegg fortune, were not the possessions of Baron Kurt von Hardenegg, but of his uncle, who had disappeared years before, and who might at any moment come again on the scene. Every one would turn from him with distrust or contempt, and no one would be ready to come forward with the sum that was needed to redeem the notes which were in Rhoden's hands.

What if he should not be able to release them on the day they came due? Only one avenue was open. There was but one last expedient. He thought of his mother; she must have a good, round sum at her command. Perhaps she would be able to assist him for the moment; but even if she were both able and willing, could he demand of her such a sacrifice? He could not tell how all this threatened trouble would end, and it would be an added crime to draw so heavily on his mother's private fortune. Nevertheless, his thoughts always turned back to this point. Was not his mother answerable for a great part of all that had happened? Had he not to shoulder the crimes of both parents, and walk in the path, whether rough or smooth, which they had marked out for him? But above all, his mother was wise and energetic. During the lifetime of her husband she had warned him day after day of the possibility of the absent brother's return; perhaps she would be able to advise her son, upon whom so much had fallen in a single day, and who saw no gleam of light from any other quarter.

Wearily, like an invalid, Kurt rose from the table. He could not wait until the following morning; he did

not feel strong enough to bear this frightful burden alone during the silent watches of the night. He would awaken his mother. What did a few hours' loss of sleep signify, when there was so much at stake—honor, yes, even life itself. Truly one could not be regardful of trifles.

He crossed the room quietly, but suddenly stood still, attracted by the hasty opening and shutting of doors in the neighboring apartments, and a second later the library door was opened and shut with a click, and his mother's tall figure emerged from behind the portière. She, whom he had believed to be slumbering peacefully, had sought him out in the middle of the night, and he had only to glance at her face to see that he need expect neither advice nor help from her.

He noted at a glance her state of uncontrollable excitement. She was fully dressed; but her attire showed great confusion and negligence. Her hair hung in disorder on her forehead and neck, and her face seemed to have aged years since the previous night; her eyes were sudken and flickering, and her lips bloodless.

For a moment mother and son looked at one another without speaking; then he went to her and led her to a chair, for he saw how her body trembled, and her knees seemed barely able to support their burden.

"So you know it already?" she asked, with a hot breath. "Some one has told you that he lives, and is in our neighborhood?"

Their rôles were exchanged. He had hoped to gain confidence and get advice from her, but now he must quiet her as best he knew how.

"Compose yourself," he said. "Only when we lose ourselves, is all lost; and what may not happen when a servant's idle gossip drives you into such a condition! This man is a lunatic or an impostor! He'll never suc-

ceed in convincing the world and the courts that he is Botho von Hardenegg."

The Baroness had caught a glimmer of hope as he began, but before he finished she was more depressed than ever, and a keener anxiety was visible on her pale face.

"He is no impostor, Kurt! He is your father's brother; that is, over and above all, certain!"

"And how comes it that you are so positive? Have you spoken to him?"

"Not I, but one has who knows him well enough; old Heitmann has talked with him."

"And he asserts that he recognizes him? Speak, I implore you; tell me all you know! This is certainly no time for half confidences and useless questions."

"Have patience with me, Kurt. It seems to me as if my head would burst, or I should lose my senses. It was my maid who brought me the news, which she said was in every mouth in the Castle. Old Heitmann had told them with tears of joy that Baron Botho had returned. He had seen him and recognized him last evening in the park. I believed as you do, my son. I thought that the childish old man had been imposed upon by some schemer, and I sent for him to come to me at once. But it was no delusion, after all. Old Heitmann had never been so clear or positive about anything as about this man's identity. I have also seen your uncle, and I not only noted some physical peculiarities which Heitmann had recognized, but Heitmann and he talked over certain matters of which no one could have been cognizant but a real Hardenegg. Believe me, Kurt, it is he! You must seek him out, and throw yourself at his feet, because our future destiny hangs on his favor."

The Baron interrupted her with a sneering laugh.

"If that is your last hope, you may bury it. If this old man is in truth my Uncle Botho, he will have as little sympathy for us as the fox has for the hare, which he finally surprises. For years he has not lost sight of us; for years he has waited an opportune moment when he could annihilate us, could grind us to powder with one blow. Under a false guise he has possessed himself of my most dangerous secrets while lulling me to sleep in full security; with the patience of the devil he has waited while debt after debt has accumulated, and, when at last all avenues of escape for you and me are cut off, he springs on us like a cat. And you expect sympathy from him? His triumph would be all the greater if I pleaded for mercy. No, mother, whatever happens, I will never grovel at that man's feet!"

The Baroness rose at once. All her old strength and decisiveness seemed to have returned.

"There's only one salvation for us," she said. "We must fly—this very night!"

Hardenegg's lips trembled with a bitter smile.

"Fly? And where? Is there a place in the whole world where one can hide the consciousness of his own infamy?"

She did not seem to understand his biting answer.

"It is impossible," she went on, hastily. "I cannot believe that he has deliberately planned our ruin; but, in any event, we must checkmate him. We must get off unmolested to America, where we will at least be safe from his vengeance. You are young enough, Kurt, to establish a new home for yourself. The means will not be wanting, either, for while I have no great fortune, we will not go with empty hands. I have been preparing for years for this terrible possibility, and we will at least be able to ward off poverty and distress."

Hardenegg did not answer. Perhaps he had not even

heard her, as she spoke with such renewed energy. He stood with his back turned to her, gazing at his uncle's portrait lying on the table before him. His face had a hard, uncomfortable expression, and the lines in his forehead looked as though they had been made with a chisel.

His mother laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Why do you not answer me, Kurt? Do you not think it best to fly from all this frightful uncertainty without delay?"

He turned and looked at her with a glance which she thought almost treacherous.

"Yes, I think with you it will be best to fly from all this uncertainty. You are right, mother, and in this very night the flight must be accomplished."

"You must make some excuse to the servants for our sudden journey, when you order the carriage. They won't believe you, will doubtless surmise the whole thing, but that need not trouble us; we shall never see them again. But hurry; for no time is to be lost. The express will be here in two hours. If we can catch it we are saved. I have but few preparations to make, and can be ready in half an hour. My maid is true and to be depended upon. She will accompany us, at least part of the way, and we will, of course, take no other servant with us. I will hurry and dress myself, and you make what arrangements are necessary; for you know, my son, any negligence now will cost us dear. When I return I trust you will be all ready."

With excessive haste, in order to conceal her great anxiety, the Baroness had spoken to her listening son, and he had nodded once or twice, as if to show his approval of her plans. Now he accompanied her to the door.

"Farewell for awhile, my poor, dear son," she said,

embracing him. "I hope we shall be able to conquer all our difficulties!"

"I hope so, also," he answered, in a toneless voice. "Farewell, farewell!"

He held the hangings back until her steps died away, then he let them fall heavily and returned to his table. But he struck no bell in order to summon a servant and give the orders which his mother had wished. To all appearances he had nothing to do which required haste. He paced the room a few times with his hands locked behind him. Then he sat down to his writing-table and wrote a short note, which he read over before addressing it, to Baron Rhoden. This was how the letter ran:

"You have lost your money, my poor Hartmuth, for I have become bankrupt—bankrupt in honor as well as cash. That I have absolutely nothing, you will believe without my assurance, for of what I leave behind, there will—alas! be nothing to satisfy your claims. This estate was never rightfully mine. Look to it, what terms you can make with the rightful possessor, and if your grudge grows deeper, you can send a few curses after me. I think they will make my future neither better or worse.

HARDENEGG."

When he had sealed this note, he opened the secret drawer in which his revolver lay. He was ready for flight before the half hour was up, and he had the advantage of his mother in going to a country which no earthly prosecution could reach. The Baron pushed his easy chair back a little with his foot; then he bent forward slightly and brought the muzzle of the revolver close to his right temple—without touching it with the

cold steel, and then laid his first finger on the trigger. Half a second longer—and then a short, sharp sound vibrated through the room, followed immediately by a heavy rumble as the weapon and victim fell with a dull thud to the floor.

The porcelain edge on the cornice of the wainscoting rattled softly, and a great beetle, startled from its quiet, flew hither and thither, anxious to find some mode of egress from the powder-smoke which filled the air.

But the dwellers within Castle Buchwald had heard no sound.

* * * * *

A half hour later the dowager Baroness returned to her son. Her attire was as elegant and faultless as in the days of her prosperity, and her silver hair was arranged smoothly and becomingly over her temples. She pulled the portières back hastily, hoping to find Kurt awaiting her in traveling costume.

She saw him stretched out in front of his writing-table, with face turned upwards; she saw the glittering weapon, which had slipped from his right hand, and the glassy, staring eyes, which seemed to be seeking her own. Her hands reached out for support into the empty air, and without a cry of terror or a despairing moan, she sank unconscious to the floor.

So she was found by her maid an hour later, and that woman's piercing shrieks soon brought every inmate of the Castle to the fatal room.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The tragedy of Buchwald created a great stir in the social world ; but only a very few were cognizant of the causes which had led to it. People whispered to one another that there was a mystery somewhere ; but the whole affair soon became a thing of the past, as other tragedies, with their complementary comedies, engaged society's attention.

Botho von Hardenegg knew that the dark family secrets would never go beyond a very narrow circle. He did all he could to shield Elfriede from any unfavorable comments which might be made.

The communication which he had made to his nephew in the old artist city over four years ago, had been in all particulars accurate ; but there were many important circumstances connected with his life in Russia which he had not thought it advisable to relate. And one of the most important was the fact that just before his arrest in St. Petersburg as a political intrigant, he had left his valuable papers and documents, together with a large sum of gold and his treasured Cremona, in the hands of a reliable friend, from whom he obtained them again after his successful escape from the mines. These documents contained indisputable proofs that he was a German and the Baron Botho von Hardenegg, and were absolutely convincing when supplemented by the official records at St. Petersburg ; and no one had a right to ask why he now brought them forward for the first time.

The judges of the Probate Court were of opinion that he had never heard that the Czar had long since par-

doned his alleged offence, and had kept himself concealed fearing that the Russian government would demand his surrender ; and Kostomarow saw no reason for disturbing their conclusion.

He entered upon his inheritance, but his conduct showed that as far as he was personally concerned it was a worthless possession.

When at the funeral of Kurt von Hardenegg, a representative of the old, hereditary nobility of the province advanced to the open grave and solemnly broke in pieces the escutcheon of the Hardenegg's and threw the fragments down upon the coffin, in token that the last of the race was there laid to rest, Kostomarow had offered no objection ; so now he made no effort to revive the family name.

He did not take possession of Castle Buchwald, whose only occupants were the servants and overseers and the poor mother who lay for several weeks very ill, and he forbade any one calling him by his right name.

Elfriede and Marguerite had established themselves in their old home under the protection of their brother Ewald. Kostomarow still lived in his modest quarters at the parsonage, and was often seen in friendly converse with his once bitter enemy, Balthasar Stiller, who now looked upon him with reverence as the benefactor of his distinguished son. But joy over his son's return could not make the old painter quit his cosy retreat at the forestry. He felt the inspiration of his surroundings in his forest home, and already addressed the happy Reinach on all occasions as "dear son-in-law."

Kostomarow seemed to have much to do in the neighborhood, but especially at the Great House at Lankenau. As he walked through Count Bassewitz's park, after leaving his little basket phaeton, a lovely young maiden would come to meet him, and her face would beam with

youthful joy and happiness as she hung on the arm of the lame old man. Without shyness or embarrassment, but with a charmingly roguish look, she would peer with her dark eyes into the wrinkled face, when he would say in his usual harsh voice: "Will not the little Countess be afraid of such a terrible looking father-in-law?" She would shake her beautiful head and answer, laughing: "If he had two horns and a cloven foot, I should love him with my whole heart, just the same."

She had good reason to do so. Soon enough her own and Ewald's secret was known. Count Bassewitz's opposition to his daughter's betrothal to the young violinist was both obstinate and earnest; but Kostomarow knew what means to use to conquer him. Perhaps the lovers' unwavering constancy had something to do with it. Perhaps it was the intimation conveyed by Kostomarow to the Count that he would give Ewald a considerable fortune at once, and at his death make the young man heir to the Hardenegg estate. Ewald was not informed of his benefactor's intentions, but the Count obtained a written guarantee.

At the beginning of winter the Baroness von Hardenegg left Castle Buchwald for a second time. Her hair was snow-white, and her bearing was that of a broken-hearted old woman. She took a silent farewell of the tomb of her only son in the Hardenegg vaults the day she left. Only her maid accompanied her. Kostomarow allowed her a liberal income from his estates during the remainder of her life-time, which she spent under the blue skies of Italy.

* * * * *

When the long, hard winter was again past, and the flowers were blooming in all their gorgeous spring

colors in the valley of Buchwald, there sounded forth one day from the bell-tower of the village church at Frauensee a merry chime. The little church could not contain the guests who came from far and near. Balthasar Stiller sat in the front pew beneath the altar between the Count von Bassewitz and Kostomarow. The tears were coursing down the old painter's face, though he hardly seemed conscious of them ; but they were tears of deepest joy, for to-day he was to witness the marriage of his son Ewald with the Countess Hertha von Bassewitz, and of his daughter Marguerite to the King's head-forester, Reinach, the man who had saved his life, and—what he esteemed much more valuable—had redeemed his artist's name.

Pastor Werner performed the two ceremonies. His words were as earnest and his manner as impressive as ever, and when the services were ended, Ewald held his friend in a long and fervent embrace.

Then the wedding train was set in motion, not toward deserted Buchwald, but toward the Great House at Lankenau. The carriages moved but slowly, for the village children strewed fir branches in the way, and fairly covered the newly married couples with the delicate wild flowers of the valley. The lads shouted and threw their little caps in the air, while the wives and maidens waved their handkerchiefs ; it was a long day of jubilee to the villagers, such as they had never before seen at Frauensee.

While the revellers were still seated round the gaily decorated and glistening tables at Lankenau, and the mirth of the wedding feast was at its highest, two of the guests slipped away from the brilliant company and strolled out side by side beneath the spreading branches of the tall park trees. A man and woman, still in the bloom of youth, but in whose serious, thoughtful faces

was throned the earnestness which tells of life's storms prematurely encountered and of life's trials overcome. They had much to say to one another, but the words came hesitatingly to their lips.

At last Werner took his companion's hand in his own, as he said in a low, tender tone :

"The house which I have made ready for my wife is yet vacant ; it is but a poor, modest home. Elfriede, my dear Elfriede, can you yet decide to share it with me?"

She raised her lovely eyes to his face with an expression of deep affection, as she answered, softly :

"My heart belongs to you, John, to-day and always. But we have waited so long now, that we can afford to be patient a little longer. When time has cast its subduing shadow upon the horrors of the past, and that fearful experience is no longer an ever-present dream, I will come to you joyfully, and lay my hand in yours trustfully and devotedly, for all future time."

And, turning, she led the way silently through the evening twilight, back to the house of gladness and mirth.

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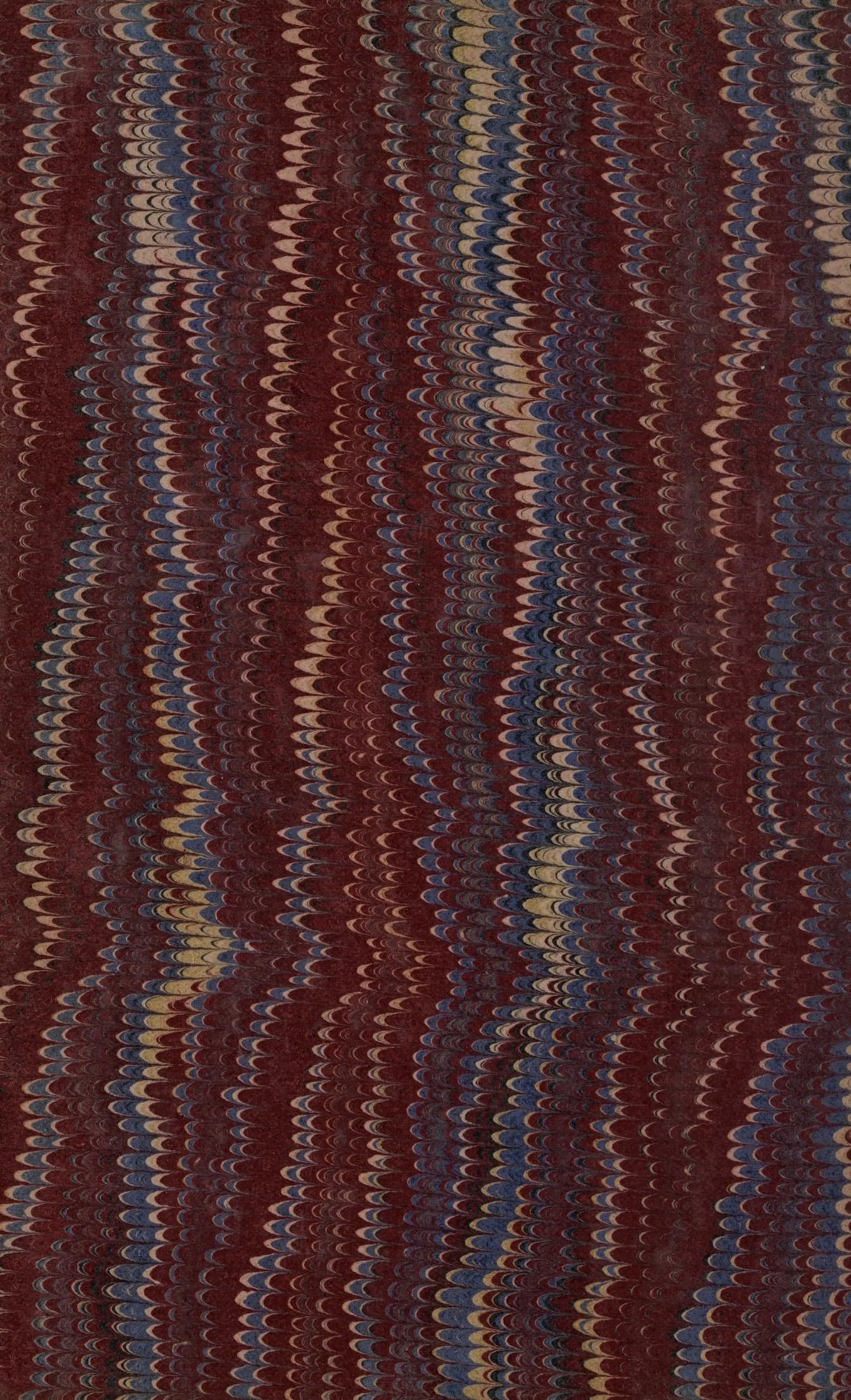
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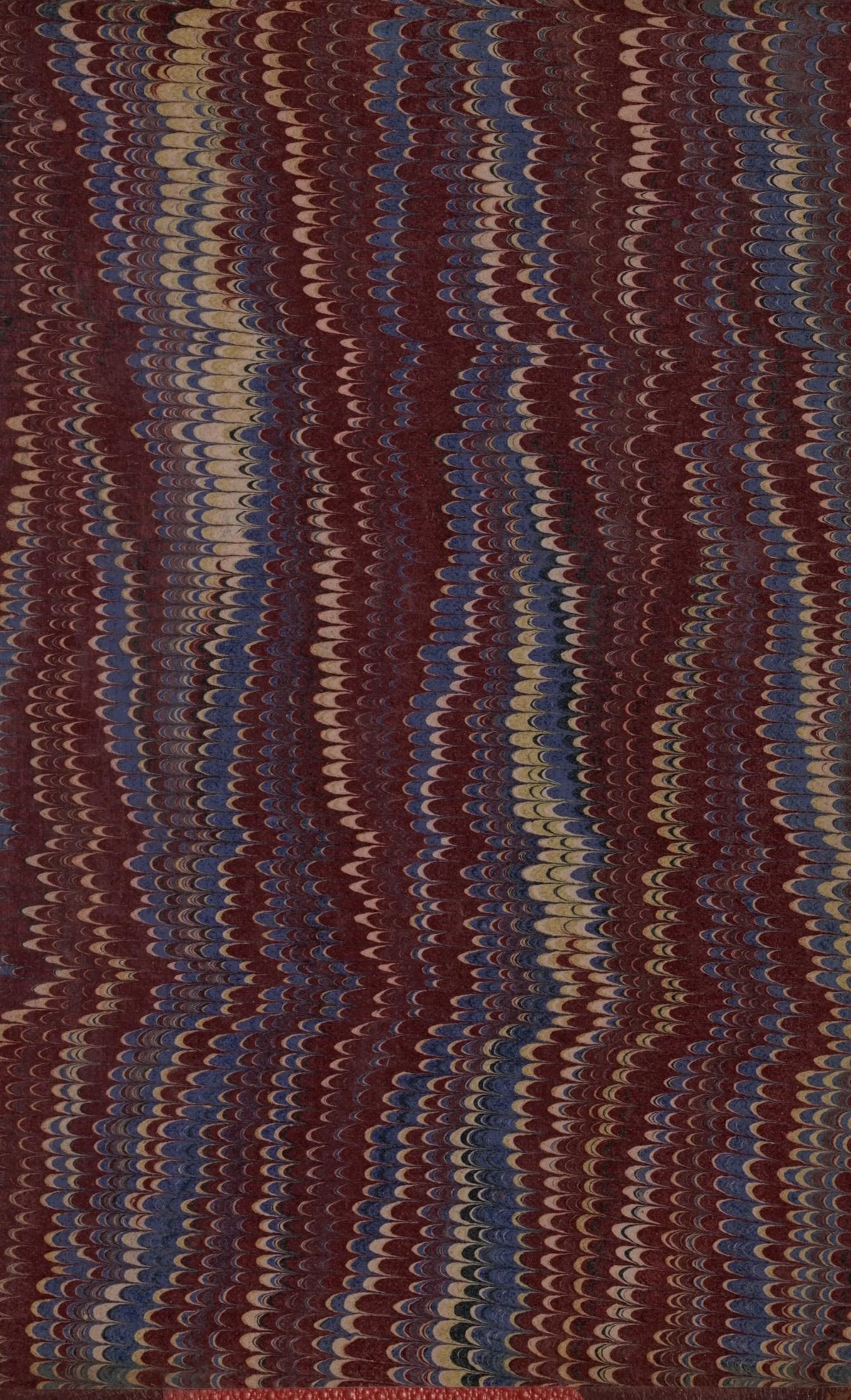
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