THE BLOOD-TAX

DOROTHEA
GERARD

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
1800

Class PZ3

Book .L855Bl

Copyright No.

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

THE BLOOD-TAX

By

DOROTHEA GERARD

Author of "*One Year*," "*The Million*,"
Etc., Etc.

Longard de Longgarde

35

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

NEW YORK
Dodd, Mead and Company
1902

M

PZ3
L855Bl

THE LIBRARY OF
CONGRESS,
Two Copies Received
AUG. 14 1902
Copyright Entry
May 5, 1902
CLASS a XXc. No.
32226
COPY B.

Copyright, 1902,
By Dodd, Mead and Company.

FIRST EDITION PUBLISHED
AUGUST, 1902

THE CAXTON PRESS
NEW YORK.

THE BLOOD-TAX

CHAPTER I.

"All the available forces of Great Britain, the European, the Indian, the Egyptian brigades, the auxiliary Colonial troops have, amid the war-like bellowing of public opinion, been drawn together on the scene of the conflict; and no Englishman notices, or wants to notice, that, in order to reach this end, the Lion has had to strain its last muscle,—to pump out its last drop of blood. Henceforward no one will tremble when the impotent monster lifts its clawless paws, or bares its shaky teeth!"

With an impatient movement James Millar tossed aside the German paper with which he had been attempting to beguile the tedium of a long railway journey, and turned to stare moodily out of the window.

Flat fields and straight roads, interspersed with villages that looked as neat as though they had been recently unpacked out of a magnified toy box, were scudding past at the rate of seventy miles an hour. The coating of snow, thin almost as a coating of fresh paint, spread evenly over the landscape, enhanced the impression of monotony and tidiness. Tidy also appeared the rare figures of which passing glimpses could be caught—broad-shouldered, lumbering-looking workmen occupied here and there on some piece of winter work; or big, buxom women standing in their doorways to gape after the express—tidy, and not much more lively than the symmetrical fields among which they lived. Once, when slowing before a larger station, the train, skirting a vast enclosed piece of ground, gave its passengers the opportunity of observing several companies of infantry, in the smart German uniform, diligently wheeling about to words of command so ringing and so close that they rose above the rattle of the wheels. It was at this juncture that the face of James Millar lost its moodiness and changed to an eager interest. Rising hastily, he moved to the window, and strained his eyes towards the uniforms for so long as they remained visible. Then, with a sigh, he sat down again.

"You are admiring our beautiful infantry, are you not?" asked a German fellow traveller, with whom he had exchanged a few desultory remarks earlier in the day, and speaking in a tone that was unmistakably one of proud possession. "Tell me truly: have you ever seen anything like them?"

"I have seen better than them," replied Millar, whose German, though decidedly British in accent, was fluent. "It is not their quality that impresses me at all."

"What then?"

"Their quantity," said Millar, a little reluctantly.

"You are an English officer, I presume?"

"Be sure that if I was I should not be here now.

Unfortunately I only represent what you call the 'shop-keeping' element of my nation; but that does not mean that I care only for shop-keeping."

"(A *commis-voyageur?*" thought the fat, inquisitive German. "Yet his manners are almost too good for that.")

"And you are journeying in the interests of your business, no doubt?"

"I am not journeying; I am only getting to my destination, which is Mannstadt, if you care to know."

"Ah! and your residence will be for long?"

"The engagement I have received is for one year."

"Ah!"

Although burning for more precise information the German contented himself with observing:—

"You will be very busy during this year, I suppose."

"Yes, very busy—and not with my business alone."

He was looking out of the window again, and the tone sufficed to tell even this thick-skinned fellow-traveller that the conversation was for the present closed. As his eyes returned to the landscape his thoughts slipped back into the groove out of which the sight of the infantry had jerked them. It was a groove which was becoming habitual to this not quite typical "shopkeeper."

This was by no means James Millar's first acquaintance with the Continent. Owing to certain business operations of his father's, a considerable portion of his childhood had been passed in Germany; and, as chance would have it, next door to a barrack-yard in a large, garrison town. Small wonder that he had carried back to his English home vague, but not the less brilliant, visions of blazing uniforms, of flashing swords, of endless columns of close ranks, with the voice of the trumpets and the roll of the drums ever in his ears—the deep, indelible impression of a nation standing under arms. It was an impression which from the imagination of the child passed over into that of the man, to lie latent, until circumstances called it back to full life. Yet during all these years he had never quite ceased to be haunted by the idea that his own country was staying behind in the universal military race; nor, although family reasons pressed him into his father's career, did he ever quite lose the feeling of being a soldier *manqué*. Good business-man though he had become, a little of the military glamour which had dazzled his childhood still floated before his maturer eyes, causing him to follow even the faintest movement in army reform with almost as keen an interest as every improvement in his own especial branch of trade, and forcing him often, with considerable searchings of heart, to put to himself the question: "Can we go on as we are going? Will we not have to do as the others do?"

The events of October, 1899, having transferred this chronic anxiety into an acute one, his first impulse had been to volunteer for South Africa, but the necessary qualifications for a commission not being forthcoming, the alternative would have been the rank of a private, and from this, despite his robust patriotism, he shrank, chilled perhaps by certain dim yet drastic memories of the German barrack-yard, with whose doings he had once been so familiar. The question as to whether enthusiasm or reluctance would prevail, was still hanging in the balance, when a timely accident decided the question. A German bicycle manufacturer, wishing to arrange his business upon strictly English methods, offered him the direction of the manufactory for a year. Having taken twenty-four hours to consider, Millar closed with the offer. The terms were brilliant, but it was not these which had enticed him, it was the opportunity thus unexpectedly presented. For months past, that is, since the initial reverses to English arms, he had been coming to a reluctant conclusion with himself. Quite in the bottom of his heart that standing question: "Will we not have to do as the others do?"—had long been answered with "Yes,"—but it was only now that he dared to acknowledge it even in his own mind. But the voice to bring about the great revolution, where was it? If it should prove impossible to convert to the cause another, more powerful, might it not be his own, since eloquence must surely come to him to whom conviction has already come?

But besides eloquence and conviction, knowledge was necessary, and where could that be better gathered than in the country which is *par excellence* the military country? A year's residence in Germany, if properly employed, could not fail to give him the necessary insight into the organisation, the system, the general working of the most efficient army in Europe. Mountains of proof could in that time be collected of the moral and physical benefits procured to the nation by the sacrifice of such a very small piece of personal independence. Armed with these he would return, would, with patience, perseverance, and money, find a road into Parliament. And, having thus gained the ear of the nation, would assail it with so many unanswerable arguments that even British stiff-neckedness would have to bend before the irresistible necessity of the "Blood-Tax."

Such, in general lines, was the programme which James Millar, in the sanguine enthusiasm of his twenty-nine years and his stout British heart, had sketched out for himself, and on which he was pondering as he gazed out of the window of the express which bore him towards Mannstadt.

Everything which he had seen or heard since putting his foot on Continental ground had served only to strengthen his convictions. Even the bombastic newspaper article headed, "The pumped-out Lion," which he had just thrown aside—too ridiculous, in truth, to be taken seriously, added its pin-prick to that chronic irritation from which at that period English nerves were universally suffering. There were other papers beside him, with other leading articles, but all tuned to the same note.

"How their fingers are itching to get at us!" was the reflection unavoidably suggested by their perusal. "And it would be a fine thing too"—Millar's thoughts carried him on—"to be the best-hated nation of the earth, if only we were also the best armed."

CHAPTER II.

That same evening, having washed off the dust of the journey, Millar was presenting himself to his employer, who proved to be a tall, grey-haired, decorous-looking personage, with a slight, badly-masked nervousness of manner, for which at first sight there seemed to be no adequate reason.

The apartment in which Herr Elsner received his newly engaged director was as decorous as himself, and also as obviously well-to-do, bearing upon its heavily-carved furniture, its plainly but expensively papered walls, its thick, soberly-tinted carpets, the unmistakable seal of wealth tempered by self-restraint.

It was some minutes before Millar could come to any conclusion with himself regarding the man beside whom his lot was to be cast for a full twelve-month. The first impression, indeed, had not been unfavourable, yet certain peculiarities of manner seemed to demand an explanation.

"You have a long journey behind you," began Herr Elsner, smiling rather suddenly, and becoming grave again with the same abruptness. "That is to say when one considers the speed of our express trains, it seems almost absurd to speak of long journeys; those are things of the past. But perhaps you are nevertheless tired?" he asked, with a return of what looked like anxiety.

Then—Millar having disclaimed any such sensations—

"Ah, yes, the English power of resistance—such strength! such vitality! Truly, it awakens the wonder of the world. That is to say"—he hurriedly corrected himself—"when not applied to illegal ends."

As he sharply cleared his throat his eyes went instinctively to the newspaper at his elbow, which he had laid down on Millar's entrance, and on whose open page the young Englishman could catch the heading of the "Pumped-out Lion" article, with which he was already so disagreeably familiar.

"I think I have him now," was Millar's reflection after a few more minutes of desultory conversation. "It's the dislike to commit himself to any positive assertion which puts him in such a hurry to modify his statements—a sort of degenerated prudence, acquired by too strict a course of business habits, no doubt. Anxiety not to say anything that he may be called upon to stand to later on—that's the root of the nervousness. But not a bad sort, all the same. Now, at this moment, I can plainly see that his honest German soul is hovering between the desire to make me feel welcome in a strange land, and deep-seated disapproval of the grasping and piratical race to which I belong, and which his favourite 'daily' has just been holding up to his condemnation."

"I shall be very curious for your opinion of the manufactory," began Herr Elsner, after a prolonged scrutiny of his well-made boots. "According to our standards there are few faults to find; but I am well aware that this is a branch of trade in which you have outstripped us." He smiled this time openly, as though glad to have found a perfectly safe compliment to pay. "That is why I have decided for the English methods. And the sooner the changes can be carried through the better; several large orders are waiting—the largest quite lately received is from the War Office."

"The War Office?" asked Millar, becoming more attentive. "What do they want bicycles for?"

"For the autumn manœuvres, which are to be on an exceptionally large scale this year, and during which more extensive experiments are to made with cyclemen scouts."

"Ah! More experiments? Really your government does not go to sleep, whatever may be said of others!"

The laugh that went with the words was so unmistakably tinged with bitterness that Herr Elsner's decorous face showed a mild perplexity.

"So we shall be working for the army? That gives me a quite new interest in my task, and a new zest; for I can truly say that my admiration of your magnificent army dates back to my childhood. To be quite frank—it was the chance of studying the military question at head-quarters which decided me to close with your offer. But you need not be afraid," added Millar, thinking to see an additional shade of anxiety on his employer's face; "my work shall not suffer because of my private passions. Although I confess that rifles and cannons appear to me just now the most interesting articles of manufactory, be sure that nevertheless the bicycle shall come first. And if in my leisure hours I choose to regale myself with the sight of your splendid uniforms, I presume that your patriotism can only take it as a compliment."

He looked straight at Herr Elsner, expecting to meet unqualified approval, but was astonished to read a mixture of emotions, seemingly struggling for the upperhand. That the appeal to patriotism had not fallen flat was to be clearly seen by the flush which had invaded the long, clean-shaven face, as well as the newly-lit spark in the pale grey eyes, and yet the thin-lipped mouth was jerking undecidedly, almost disapprovingly.

"Our army—ah, yes, who would not be proud of that? The most magnificent in Europe—you say truly. No one grudges to our soldiers the recognition they deserve, but is that a reason for withholding from other classes the meed they work for surely as hard as do our soldiers? Cannot the man with a black coat to his back be as good a patriot as the one in uniform, and is it not hard upon him to see the uniform always preferred? That is to say"—and Herr Elsner pulled himself up with a visible jerk—"our gracious Emperor is the same to all his subjects, of course, though himself a soldier; it is the public only that seems inclined to make invidious distinctions—that is to say, at moments and on certain occasions."

"Yes, I know that the army is the spoilt child of the empire," said Millar, with true British directness making straight for his object; "but I confess that it would give me great pleasure to make a nearer acquaintance with a few of those spoilt children. Do you know, Herr Elsner, I have been wondering whether you will be able to procure me any introductions to military circles? With so large a garrison as Mannstadt possesses I presume you have various officers on your visiting list?"

Over Herr Elsner's face, out of which the patriotic flush had scarcely died, there abruptly came a certain prim stiffening of all the features.

"Not at all; we have no military names on our visiting list. In a place like Mannstadt you will readily understand that there is room for various circles of society, and that the very difference in their ingredients tends to keep each to itself. The gentlemen of the army have their own interests, their own pursuits, their own habits, and we have ours; therefore, though I can introduce you to many most honourably-placed business friends, I cannot take you into any officer's house."

This time the badly suppressed soreness of tone, in which a little half-pathetic wistfulness seemed to be mixed, could not escape the listener's attention, and had the effect of setting him pondering.

When, a few minutes later, he rose to leave, the hour for next day's inspection of the manufactory had been fixed.

"There is the clever young engineer whom I have lately engaged," said Elsner, rising likewise. "That is to say I take him to be clever, though his manner verges on the impertinent. When you have spoken to him you will tell me whether he will do for fitting up the new machinery. I have appointed him to meet us to-morrow."

He stopped short, but instead of grasping the hand which Millar had instinctively extended, stood for a moment frowning at the floor and apparently engaged in some sharp mental conflict.

"If you are not too tired, perhaps you will allow me to present you to my wife?" was the phrase which broke the silence, showing that the instinct of hospitality had triumphed over that of caution.

Along a well carpeted passage Millar followed his host to a sumptuously furnished boudoir, in which a big, fair-haired woman, who ten years ago had probably been something quite out of the common in the *Walküre* style of beauty, shyly and pompously received him. Her hair was still beautiful, as also were her full red lips, but Walküres, if they consult their vanity, should never drink beer, and the redundancy of outline here clearly showed that too many "Viertels" had been indulged in. "An over-grown, over-fed child," was Millar's verdict at the conclusion of a conversation whose naïve warmth of interest—Frau Elsner seemed chiefly anxious to know whether he had had enough to eat on the journey—both amused and a little touched him. "Then she is not the piano-player," he added in his mind.

Even while closeted with Elsner in the distant business-room the sound of piano-chords had come faintly to his ear. It had met him more distinctly in the corridor, but instead of coming to an end with the opening of the door, as he had expected, those chords, sad and soft, continued to penetrate in monotonous repetition from some apartment alongside, where in the pauses of conversation the conscientious "one—

two—threes" of the invisible practiser were plainly audible. "Sounds like the accompaniment of a song," thought Millar, to whom the melody seemed not quite unfamiliar.

Towards midday on the following day the inspection of the manufactory was over, and Millar, having settled all necessary preliminaries with Herr Elsner, who had now hurried home to his midday meal, found himself standing in the big, unbeautiful workyard, in the company of Gustav Hort, that same young engineer whom the manufacturer had committed himself so far as to pronounce clever. It had not been without an additional word of warning that Elsner had left his new director *tête-à-tête* with this young man.

"Very much inclined to be forward, you know; the sort of person that requires a good deal of keeping in his place, and with some extremely dangerous opinions," and this time there had actually been no modification added.

The person thus described did not at first sight appear to bear out this unfavourable verdict. A tall, dark-haired young man, younger obviously than Millar himself, with a singularly wide forehead, broad and somewhat prominent cheek-bones, a sharply pointed chin, whose sharpness was accentuated by the stubbly black beard that outlined the face, a pair of fine dark eyes looking out somewhat morosely from under straight eyebrows—such was the appearance which Millar's new acquaintance presented. Striking he undoubtedly was, and would have been strikingly handsome but for the ill-humour in the eyes and a certain want of straightness in the carriage of the well-built figure. Neither did he impress Millar as unsympathetic, although his first words seemed to bear out at least one side of Herr Elsner's opinion of him.

"So we are to work together, it seems," he remarked, without waiting for the other's address, and without taking his hands out of his great-coat pockets, into which he had deeply thrust them. "It is to be hoped that we shall get on."

"That will depend principally upon yourself," said Millar, somewhat distantly, mindful of Herr Elsner's warning. But the unabashed engineer began to smile visibly under his beard.

"I know what you are thinking of; shall I tell you? At this moment you are saying to yourself: 'The impudence of the animal! It isn't together we are to work, it is one above the other, and I, of course, on the top.' Have I guessed it? Since you're an Englishman I suppose you will tell me the truth."

"What makes you suppose that my nation cannot fib when they find it convenient?"

"Ah, I don't say they cannot, only that it costs them a greater effort, and that, consequently, the bribe offered requires to be larger. I am calculating the proportion of chances, that is all."

"And where have you gathered your extremely flattering opinions of my country, if I may ask?"

"I haven't gathered them, I have drawn my conclusions."

"From what?"

"From your national institutions, your laws, your customs. Not that I approve of them unconditionally, but among a mass of pernicious institutions they seem to me the least pernicious. Over there, at least, an individual may feel that he is an individual, while here—" he shrugged his shoulders and threw a sharp glance around him, as though suddenly remembering that inconvenient listeners might be near.

"What do you think of your new master?" he enquired, by way, obviously, of changing the subject.

"Really, I don't see—" began Millar in a fresh accent of astonishment.

"What business I have to feel any curiosity on the subject, or what business either you or I have to have any opinion at all of the man who pays us both; it's his money that regards us, and not his character, that's what you were nearly saying, was it not? And yet that does not sound quite British. Over there you *are* allowed to have a private opinion, are you not?"

"Yes, but over there we have a way of keeping it to ourselves."

"I understand. That is snub number two; before it comes to number three it will be as well to explain ourselves. Since we are to work together it would certainly simplify matters if we completely understood each other's point of view. Mine is very simple: It is my technical knowledge that I have farmed out to Herr Elsner for the present, not my private views, and so long as I give him the best I have in that line I cannot acknowledge other obligations towards him, just as little as I can acknowledge your social superiority to myself. For the work we have to do you require my skill quite as much as I require Herr

Elsner's money; we each contribute a necessary ingredient to the result, therefore in my opinion we all stand equal. If you reflect upon this for a moment you will understand that our intercourse can only be pleasant if conducted on terms of perfect equality. On these terms I am perfectly ready to be of service to you in any way in which a native may serve a stranger, but only on these terms. It stands with you to close with them or to reject them."

His gloomy eyes lit up as he said it, and something in the squareness of the look by which he felt himself challenged, weighed down the balance in Millar's mind in favour of this new and somewhat startling acquaintance.

"I will close with them," he said, frankly putting out his hand. "This morning's inspection has shown me that you are the man I need; nor do I require to make any violent effort to accept your friendship on the terms you offer it, since I have been taught from childhood that work is at least as respectable as money."

"That will do," said Hort, curtly, placing his hand for one moment in that of Millar. "You are a stranger here; you will tell me if I can aid you in anything."

"There is one thing that perhaps you can help me in. I have already applied to Herr Elsner, but it seems he can do nothing. I absolutely require some introductions to military men; perhaps you can procure me these?"

"Military men!" The accent in which Hort repeated the words was one almost of consternation, while his dark eyes grew, in an instant, threateningly big. “What do you require to know of military men?”

He looked so tragical as he said it that Millar nearly laughed.

“I have a plan. It would take too long to explain now. But, to be brief, I, as well as others of my countrymen, have reached the conclusion that universal conscription is the only salvation for our land. I am anxious to study the subject, and Germany is the best place for doing so: that is one of the reasons why I am here. But for this I require to get into touch with members of your splendid, your truly model army. Therefore I ask you: Can you help me here?”

Before he had done speaking, Hort had taken two steps away, agitated steps, which he immediately retraced, standing still again before Millar with a face angrily convulsed.

“What! you—*you!*” he said, moderating his voice with evident difficulty; “you, who belong to a free-born people, would bring this curse down upon a free-born land? You would lay the blood-tax upon your own shoulders? Has the spirit of slavery spread so far as that? But you don’t know what you are talking about. *My* army! Ha, ha! What a joke! Wait till I tell you—but one cannot talk here.” And again he threw that half rebellious, half fearful glance around him. “If you want this conversation to continue you must come to my lodgings: but perhaps you have heard more than you want to.”

"On the contrary, I want to hear a great deal more."

Two minutes later an address had been put down in Millar's note-book and an appointment made. As he walked back to his hotel he could not help wondering what Herr Elsner would say to this so inexplicably sudden intimacy with the very man whom he had been warned against. Undoubtedly the engineer's views of life were not quite normal, but for this very reason they piqued Millar's curiosity. A German not proud of his army! It seemed almost an anomaly. What could the man have to say against it? He must hear without delay, since it was of primary importance to look at the subject from as many different points of view as possible.

CHAPTER III.

THAT afternoon, after a tramway journey, followed by a tramp through half-deserted streets, Millar found himself at the door of about the dreariest sort of human residence he had ever known—a house, built obviously experimentally on the very outskirts of the town, destined to form part of a future street, whose lines were yet chiefly marked by plankings. In a by no means splendid isolation it now stood, having found no mate as yet, presenting, to the right and to the left, two windowless brick walls, with the mortar crumbling off the cheaply stuccoed front, and spots of damp already soaking up from the foundation, somewhat like a person who has grown prematurely old before having attained his rightful position in life. On either side tracts of building ground, on which no one built, and broken only by a few mounds of bricks now buried in snow; on the plankings, largely printed advertisements, which no one ever read, and whose paper rags fluttered limply in the wind. Nothing more depressing could well be imagined than this missed experiment of an enterprising builder seen thus through the winter dusk.

On the third storey Hort was already standing in an open doorway.

"I saw you coming; our traffic isn't so dense out here as to make it difficult to pick out an acquaintance," and he smiled sharply and bitterly. "If you do me the honour—the pleasure," he corrected himself—"of visiting me again, I should not advise you to come after dusk without a good revolver in your pocket. Why, my own apartment is not unlike a den of thieves, is it?"

"Not very unlike," mused Millar, as he looked about him at the dingy walls, whose bareness was relieved only by untidy looking pipe-racks and by a pair of crossed fencing rapiers—remnants of student days, no doubt—at the smoked ceiling, the badly painted deal floor, the huge bed-sofa, on which the cheap ginger-coloured stuff had burst at one place, allowing the horsehair stuffing to creep out.

It was on the ginger-coloured sofa that Millar was invited to take place, while Hort, having selected a cigar for his guest, proceeded to kindle a long-stemmed pipe for himself. So complete was the silence in which the next few minutes passed that the meeting seemed to bear the character of a smoking concert rather than that of a projected discussion. Even when Hort spoke at last it was not to refer to the subject of the morning's talk.

"I forget," he remarked, re-adjusting his meerschaum, "did you tell me or not whether you had seen Frau Elsner?"

"Yes; I was presented to her."

"And to no one else?"

"Is there anyone else?"

"Then you did not see Fräulein Thekla?" asked Hort, with a rather keen side glance, which escaped

Millar's attention only because he was busy with his cigar.

"No, but perhaps I heard her. There certainly was someone practising music alongside. She is the daughter, I suppose?"

"The only daughter," said Hort, briefly, and again lapsed into silence.

Having waited another minute, Millar decided for direct action.

"I, too, have an answer to claim. I asked you this morning whether you could introduce me to any officers; and, although the subject seems to touch you very nearly, you have not said either 'yes,' or 'no.'"

Awaking from deep thought with a movement whose abruptness resembled a start, Hort, without speaking at once, got up from his place, and, going to the door, seemed to be assuring himself that the passage was clear.

"Yes, it is true that the subject touches me very nearly," he said, as he slowly returned. "You will scarcely believe what a shock you gave me in talking of conscription this morning. You, an Englishman, making yourself into an advocate for that hateful military yoke! Explain that to me, if you can!"

"Explain to me, rather, how it comes, that you, a German, should be an adversary of that system whose results have placed your country so high among the nations."

"I am not a German!" said Hort, with a gesture that was almost violent.

"Not a German? What then?"

"A man born by chance in Germany, and whom this mere accident cannot identify with its hateful institutions, the most hateful of which is that mob of uniformed policemen under whose pressure we groan."

Then as Millar sat looking at him with something very like consternation on his face:—

"You are astonished, I see, and I am a little astonished myself. I do not generally give myself away quite so easily—never to a German; but you are not a German, and I am a man who goes by impressions; now your face gives me the impression that my confidence will not be misused."

"That it will certainly not be; but——"

"But you cannot help wondering what sort of a person you are talking to. I will tell you the worst at once; or rather, tell me first what you exactly understand by an anarchist?"

"An anarchist?—well, we know them mostly by hearsay as yet; but by an anarchist I fancy I understand principally a thrower of bombs and firer off of pistols at royal heads."

"I thought so. It is the terrorists that have earned us that reputation. I have nothing to do with those illogical hot-heads. Can violence be fought with violence? Why, exactly the elimination of violence is the very root of our theories. It's not in the bombs that salvation lies. But if to disapprove from the bottom of one's heart of the present constitution of society, to spend each leisure hour in studying the means for wiping away the present unhappy order and substituting another happier one, is to be an anarchist, then you have an anarchist before you, and one who would not object to dying for his cause."

He had not sat down again, and now stood still in front of his visitor, who continued to gaze up, fascinated and perplexed, into his dark, eager face.

"I can read disapproval in your eyes—that was to be expected. To begin with you are an Englishman, that is, a comparatively free individual, as ideas of freedom nowadays stand. In the second place you are well situated; that is to say, you belong to that class which profits by present arrangements. Why should you want any change? It would not profit to you, only to people of whose existence you are, of course, aware, but whom you have only looked at through the medium of dry statistics or perhaps of emotional newspaper articles,—never close at hand, never as man to man. You have subscribed to charities, of course, and given coins to beggars, and I feel certain that you have never illtreated any of the workmen in your manufactories. But what do you know of their intimate existence? Of the private miseries of those same men and women whose blistered hands gain your substantial meals first and their piece of dry bread afterwards? Have you been into their homes? Have you lain upon their beds, to prove their hardness? I have! Have you turned your stomach with the nauseous food they live upon? I have! I have! Have you held your nose at the smells they move among? If you had done all these things, or only half of them, you would not wonder at so many bombs being thrown and so many pistols fired off, you would wonder rather at there being so few; you would ask yourself with astonishment whence one-half of humanity—what do I say?—whence nine-tenths of humanity takes the ass-like docility, the imbecile patience to submit to the tyranny of the one-tenth."

With a sharply drawn breath he broke off, and, moving towards the table, began to grope about blindly for the matches, for within the last few minutes the dusk had turned almost to darkness. Millar, moved in spite of himself by the penetration of the tone and mechanically following the gestures of the other, could see how the hand which struck the match and put the flame to a tin petroleum lamp, jerked with excitement. A minute passed before the badly trimmed wick would burn, and during which neither of the men spoke.

"God forbid that I should declare everything to be as it should be," observed Millar after that pause. "Our present order of things has its flaws—its deep flaws—I admit it, though nothing proves that any better order is possible. But what puzzles me is your spite against the army; the army, surely, is not responsible for the miseries of the poor?"

"The army is the instrument of the government, is it not? its most tangible, its most efficacious instrument; no government feels quite safe except behind a hedge of bayonets; and since I disapprove of the very existence of a government I naturally disapprove of its instruments, and would disapprove, even if the cost of those smart tunics and glittering helmets did not come out of the pockets of the hungering people."

"And yet you must have passed through the army yourself?"

"If I had not passed through it, it is possible that I might hate it less," said Hort, with a simplicity that verged on the grim. "You know something of my views now; perhaps you can imagine what it means, with these views, to have to put on a uniform and become not an individual but a unit in a mass, to have to move my arms and legs, not when I want to move them, but at the bellowed-out command of some red-nosed sergeant, whom in ordinary life I would never dream of shaking hands with—my inferior in education, in breeding, in everything that ought to count, yet in uniform my superior, or rather the arbitrary sovereign before whose tipsy gaze I am expected to quail. And this is what we all have to submit to, with rage in our hearts or no, it makes no difference, —it's one of the charms of the system that private feelings do not count."

Millar was silent, lost in deep reflection. All this was so totally new to him as to be disconcerting. Whatever might be thought of conscription on the other side of the channel, he had expected to hear but one voice on this side. But, though troubled he was not shaken. The source from which the objection came was one which his law-abiding British soul could not accept as legitimate.

"At any rate, it is clear that I have come to the wrong address so far as the military introductions are concerned," he remarked presently, with a laugh which was intended to give a lighter turn to the talk. "Really, it seems that I have no luck in this matter."

"I don't know about that," said Hort, taking place again after an uneasy walk about the room, and slowly fingering his burnt-out pipe. "I have promised to help you if I could, and although I disapprove of the object, I am accustomed to keep my promises. I cannot take you into any military family, but I can do something else—I can procure you an invitation."

"To what?"

"To a big public ball that is to take place on Thursday next, the ball of the press, one of the finest feasts of every carnival, and a tremendously luxurious affair. If you want to see uniforms you will see plenty there. Yes—that will be the best way," he mused, evidently caught by something in his own suggestion; "no better opportunity of viewing the military element in its full glory;" and to himself he added, "As good a cure as any other."

"But surely you are not going to this ball?"

"Yes, I am; why should that astonish you?"

"Because the patronising of such a feast of luxury scarcely seems to accord with some of the principles you have just been——"

"I have to do lots of things that are against my principles," interrupted Hort with a return of his habitual moroseness. "Do you think it accords with my principles to help Herr Elsner to become richer than he is, by putting new machinery into his manufactory? Why do I do it? Because I am poor and must live, and because the present order of the world leaves me no other way of living," and he threw a disdainful glance around him at the cheerless room, so faintly lighted by the tin petroleum lamp that the corners remained black, and so feebly heated by the iron stove that Millar's feet were beginning to grow chilled.

"Before a necessity, of course, we have to bow," pursued Millar a little obstinately; "but in a mere question of pleasure——"

But again he was interrupted.

"In mere questions of pleasure I follow only my pleasure," said Hort more curtly than he had spoken yet, and with a certain sensitiveness of tone which seemed to imply that the point touched upon was a sore one.

CHAPTER IV.

SUCH was Millar's impatience to start on his new quest that Thursday probably appeared to him longer in coming than it did to the most pleasure-loving of the hundreds of young girls now preparing their radiant costumes for the great press ball. Every body of troops he caught sight of in the streets, every strain of military music that reached his ears served only to sharpen this impatience; they seemed each and all to be pictures come straight out of the lumber-room of childish memories, with the dust of years wiped off them, and shining once more with the bright varnish of actuality.

When the evening came on which he had fixed his hopes he and Hort were among the first to hand over their overcoats in the *garde-robe.* "Nobody comes before eleven o'clock," Hort had objected, and yet had yielded without marked resistance to the pressure of the other's impatience.

Despite his preoccupation Millar, in the moment that they crossed the threshold of the brilliantly lighted but still almost empty room, had cast upon his companion a look of some astonishment, for in this faultlessly-attired, well-groomed individual by his side it was difficult to recognise the ill-humoured wearer of those somewhat threadbare overcoats in which he had been accustomed to see the engineer lately, or the possessor of the gaping, ginger-coloured sofa, and least of all the enunciator of those revolutionary views of life with which Millar himself had been so lately startled. The ill-humour itself seemed to have yielded to the influence of the festive surroundings, or perhaps to some pleasurable expectation whose reflection was softening the harshness of the usually so gloomy eyes.

"Decidedly a good-looking fellow," was Millar's mental verdict, "and doesn't look particularly dangerous to Society just now. Quite cuts me out, too."

The mirror beside which they were passing at that moment showed him his own equally well appointed but somewhat shorter figure, whose golden-brown hair contrasted sharply with his companion's darkness.

By the time they had made one tour of the huge room they began to lose themselves among the arrivals, now streaming in incessantly; mostly black coats, as yet, enlivened here and there by a ball-dress.

"But no uniforms," remarked Millar, dissatisfied.

Hort laughed, flicking the glove he held in his hand.

"Never fear! You will have more uniforms than you have bargained for before the end of the evening. Why should a demi-god make himself cheap by coming early?"

An hour later the room was almost full, and Millar able to feast his eyes upon so many different sorts of tunics and shoulder-straps, such a brilliant display of gold cords and of glittering spurs that even his curiosity was perforce appeased. Many and costly were the women's gowns which had swept past him during that hour, but none possessed for him the charm that did the tight-fitting coats of the infantry officers or the richer dress of dragoons and lancers. Even generals' coats and broadly-decorated breasts were not awanting in the resplendent crowd, for the press ball was one of the events of the carnival.

"A splendid set of men and no mistake," mused Millar, ensconced at a point of vantage, "and they know it, too."

About this there could be no doubt. From the moment that Millar had witnessed the entrance of the very first lieutenant, glaringly visible among so many civilians, he had instantly felt that it was not his uniform alone which made him conspicuous, but also the air of complete and ostentatious assurance with which this beardless boy cast his eyes up and down the ballroom.

"Looks as if the place belonged to him, does he not?" Hort had observed in his ear.

And presently, when the uniforms had multiplied, Millar had recognised this same expression on almost every face that surmounted a military neck-band, so marked as to constitute between them something like a family likeness, which rendered them more similar even than did their military bearing, or the rigid fashion in which their hair was parted and their moustaches turned up.

Nor was this the last of the observations to which the cicerone by his side diligently assisted him.

"You have heard of chemical elements that will not mix, have you not? Here you can study the same problem applied to Society. Does it not seem as though the coloured coats and the black ones were drawn apart by some working of elementary laws?"

Millar looked, and was forced to acknowledge that, despite its exaggeration, the remark had an undoubted reason. In the mazes of the dance all elements were indeed inevitably mixed, but scarcely had the music ceased than officers of all degrees seemed naturally to gravitate towards the upper end of the room, forming there a large, irregular island of colour, out of which single as well as double eye-glasses were turned with a good deal of *sans gêne* upon the rows of ladies ranged along the walls.

"The gods in Olympus taking a look at mere mortals," remarked Hort with his bitterly incisive laugh. "And they have chosen their place well, too,—far the best for getting a good view of the dresses, and the one safest from draughts."

"Well, but they haven't hired that end of the room, I suppose?"

"Oh no; they have only been given the first choice and have taken it; just as they are given the first choice in everything else as well—in partners, for instance. Have you observed how all the black coats hang back until their excellencies of the army have made their selection?"

Millar had remarked something of the sort, and had thought also to read a quite especial light of pleasure on the faces of those ladies who had secured uniformed partners. Despite his military sympathies this so naïvely-marked preference had even provoked him a little, according badly with British ideas of individual worth.

"Can you imagine any spectacle more degrading to human nature than this truckling of one class to another?" went on Hort by his side. "Look at those two grey-haired men moving out of the road of that group of captains, as though fearing to incommode them. They are only the heads of civilian departments, poor fellows, so of course they feel it is their place to make way. Look at that row of humble, round-backed professors, unable to take their spectacled eyes off the army group? Do they not appear to be lost in ecstatic contemplation? Of what? Of a few dozen young men whom they would infallibly pluck at the simplest examination outside military lines, but which yet to these masters of learning represent the flower of the nation. Agree with me that it is ridiculous!"

"It is, at any rate, astonishing, but you must not expect me to form my conclusions so quickly. Pray don't consider yourself bound to play my chaperon all the evening," added Millar, who began to feel that he would prefer to look at things through his own eyes instead of through those of his companion. "I have the sensation of being a dead-weight on your hands. Are you not going to dance?"

"Perhaps I shall dance presently," said Hort, whose eyes, for some time past, had been constantly returning to the entrance.

"Herr Elsner mentioned that he would be here to-night, but I do not see him. He seems to have changed his mind."

"I do not think he has changed his mind; but we shall soon know; if he is coming at all he must be coming now. He is never among the early arrivals, and his passion for hitting off the *juste milieu* will forbid his coming later. You have observed his propensity for always being on the safe side, have you not? Ah! did I not say so?"

Millar, astonished at the sudden lighting up of his companion's whole face, turned his own towards the doorway in instinctive quest of the cause. Herr Elsner, with his large, fair-haired wife on his arm, was at that moment making his highly decorous entrance; but, although Frau Elsner's monumental figure was draped in sky-blue brocade, and although upon her vast, white neck glittered there a necklace of diamonds towards whose price a good many bicycles must have contributed, it was evidently not this sight which was working upon the engineer's nerves.

Millar looked beyond and began to understand, for from behind the broad, fair-haired figure, another figure, equally fair-haired, equally tall, but most divinely proportioned, had now emerged.

"I suppose that is Fräulein Thekla," he remarked, without getting any reply, and without even noticing the absence of assent, being already lost in the contemplation of this latest apparition of the ball-room.

There was a brilliancy about her which struck the spectator with almost as much astonishment as admiration, for the pure gold of her hair seemed so exactly to match the golden band at her waist and the golden hem to her skirt, her milk-white neck and arms were so near in tint to the bodice that encased them, that the first impression was of a figure all in white and gold, that of some goddess, perhaps, descended lately from Walhalla, or of some figure out of an ancient legend—a German legend, of course, for where out of Germany could such perfectly golden hair be found? In that first moment Millar was visited by the whimsical idea that the threads of gold which ran bewilderingly through the tissue of her dress were nothing but her own hair, which she had used for embroidering her gown, as other women use silk.

Having lost sight of her in the crowd, he turned, rather excitedly, to put some question to Hort, but discovered that his companion was gone. When he saw him again it was with his arm laid round Thekla Elsner's waist, and whirling along to the sound of a waltz. As he caught sight of Hort's face, so transformed by the tender light upon it as to be almost unrecognisable, Millar felt more than one light dawning in his mind. No difficulty now, at any rate, about explaining the engineer's presence here. "And I fancy I have got the clue to Elsner's antipathy to the man," he mused, as he marked how shyly Thekla's eyes were raised to her partner's face. "The paramount necessity of keeping him in his place must exercise my employer's mind considerably under the circumstances. And she looks quite romantic enough to let her heart run away with her head, I should say. Well, if I read the signs aright he is a lucky dog, and no mistake."

Something of a sigh went along with the unspoken words; for although Millar was not extraordinarily susceptible, as young men go, and although his mind was too busy at present in one direction to leave it free in others, that gold-and-white vision had touched his fancy in a way in which the many other women who had passed that evening before his eyes had failed to touch him.

That her appearance, even among this crowd of fair faces, had not missed its effect was best to be seen by a certain commotion among the group of uniforms at the upper end of the room, where an exchange of questions and answers and a general resettling of *lorgnons* and *pince-nez* were to be observed. But as yet it was only civilians that pressed around her chair, rubicund young men with carefully pomaded hair and enormous flowers in their button-holes, the scions, no doubt, of those honourable business families of whom Elsner had spoken.

"What they can do, surely I can do as well," thought Millar, making his way towards the Elsner family group.

It was a pause between two dances, and Thekla, programme in hand, was vainly endeavoring to satisfy the demands pouring in upon her. "The cotillon?" she was saying in the moment that Millar came within hearing—"I do not think we shall stay for the cotillon; it is no use engaging myself for it."

She looked up a little deprecatingly into Hort's face as she said it, and then furtively towards her father, who, standing at two paces off, was uneasily observing her.

"I really am afraid——; Mamma," and she turned towards her mother—"what do you think? Shall we be gone before the cotillon?"

"I am afraid so," said Frau Elsner, with so heavy a sigh that the diamonds which upon her plump, white neck were displayed to as great advantage as on the white velvet cushion in a jeweller's show window, heaved visibly upwards and then down again.

"It is most probable that we shall be going home early," observed Elsner, with, for him, an unusual amount of decision. "You cannot engage yourself for the cotillon."

"I suppose not," said Thekla, and as she closed her programme, Millar saw a glance exchanged between her and the engineer which certainly struck him as being one of mutual regret.

It was at this moment that he made the discovery that her eyes were of an astonishingly deep blue, so dark as not to appear blue at all unless closely looked at, and redeeming her gentle face from any danger of insipidity. Seen thus close she appeared distinctly younger than she did at a distance. Her queenly height, as well as the perfect proportions of her exquisitely moulded figure, had given Millar the impression of something entirely finished, of something beautifully mature; but at a closer view there were all sorts of childish dimples and curves to be discovered about the regal style of beauty, details of gesture and speech which told him that this golden-haired goddess was, after all, but a mortal child. Yet this second discovery brought no disappointment, rather a delicious surprise.

When Millar had been once round the room with his arm round the goddess's waist he felt more than ever inclined to envy Hort the good luck with which he credited him, for the shoulder that touched his own was of satin smoothness, and the voice in which she replied to his few remarks was of that peculiar crystal clearness which we instinctively couple with the absence of all guile. Yet the idea of putting himself up as a rival to his new friend visited him only to be rejected. It would not only be a treachery, it would also be a waste of time, since it was not for his pleasure that he was here to-night, but for his business, which, however, seemed in no way to be progressing. With growing anxiety Millar noted that time was passing, without bringing him any nearer to his object. To admire the phalanx of uniforms at a distance, even to brush elbows with them in the crowd, was an interesting experience, no doubt, but so long as he could procure no introduction little was gained. How reach the fulfilment of his desire? How break through the invisible wall, intangible but unmistakable, which seemed to raise itself between the two elements in the ball-room, the military and the civilian? He was pondering upon this problem when a small occurrence attracted his attention,—only one of the rubicund youths leading up a dragoon officer, whom with a self-conscious flourish he presented to Herr Elsner. Millar was near enough to observe the flush of mingled astonishment and gratification which spread over the manufacturer's face as he returned the salute, and then, obviously at the officer's request, took him up to his wife and daughter.

Thekla had that moment returned from a waltz tour which had been so lively as to displace one of the heavy coils of her hair. Beautifully flushed, with parted lips, and one hand held up to her head, she turned to face the new acquaintance. The flush grew deeper as she met the open admiration of the gaze fixed upon her, while as her eyes glanced over the showy uniform, Millar thought he read in them something of the same pleasurable astonishment which he had seen in the face of the father. Small wonder, indeed, since this was the first partner in uniform who had approached her to-night. In another moment his strong arm was bearing her into the heart of the brilliant crowd.

"A magnificent couple," Millar was forced to acknowledge to himself, as he noted the martial squareness of the dragoon's shoulders, and observed how even Thekla's height seemed to dwindle beside his youthfully herculean figure. As he thought it he began to search with his eyes for Hort; "Has he seen them, I wonder?" he was asking himself.

Yes, he certainly had seen them; the scowl disfiguring the engineer's face left no doubt of that. It would seem as though, for him, a black shadow had suddenly descended upon the festive scene.

But Millar's thoughts had flowed into another channel. He saw close to him at last the opportunity he had waited for all the evening. Even before Thekla had returned from her waltz tour he was standing beside Elsner.

"You have one military acquaintance now," he remarked, touching the manufacturer on the sleeve. "I presume you will have no objection to introducing me."

Elsner looked at him mistrustfully.

"That dragoon officer who is dancing with your daughter. I saw him being presented to you."

"But I don't know him at all; that is to say——"

"You know him enough for my purpose," said Millar, with the inexorableness of a fixed resolve. "There—the waltz is at an end; he is returning. Be so kind as to make us acquainted."

And the manufacturer felt himself being taken firmly by the arm and guided in the desired direction.

"Herr Millar—Lieutenant Pletze." Having murmured the words he left the two young men standing opposite to each other.

The almost naïve astonishment upon the lieutenant's face came near, in the first moment, to disconcerting Millar. "What on earth does he want of me?" those wide-open blue eyes seemed to be saying aloud. He was a splendid young giant, as Millar was able now to observe, and a typical specimen of his race, with short-cropped, curly hair, only a shade darker than Thekla's own, and a pleasantly-fresh, healthily-pink, if somewhat large-featured face. Whether he would have cut so fine a figure out of uniform was at least questionable, just as it was doubtful whether anything short of military drill would have taught him how to use his massive hands and feet without awkwardness, but such as he now stood before Millar he appeared undoubtedly calculated to attract the gaze not only of women but even of men.

With a dumb inclination he was about to turn away, when Millar, recovering from a certain momentary abashment, began to speak quickly.

"You must excuse me; this must seem to you rather abrupt. I am a stranger here, and I have a very particular request to make."

"Of me?" asked Lieutenant Pletze, raising his fair eyebrows to an almost grotesque height, while at the same time following with his eyes the movements of Thekla Elsner, who was sitting down again by her mother's side. It was obvious that the whole man was quivering with ill-suppressed impatience, fretting with every nerve of his body against this untoward interruption.

"Yes, of you, since you are the first German officer whom I have the good luck to speak to."

"You are an Englishman?"

"Yes, but an Englishman who is deeply interested in your army."

"Ah! An English officer, perhaps?" and the coldness upon the boyishly-pink face began visibly to melt.

"Unfortunately not; but I am nevertheless studying a military problem. Let me explain."

While he hurriedly sketched his views, Millar could note the exact stages by which the impatience of his hearer merged into awakening interest. When he had done speaking he found the officer's eyes fixed upon his face and shining with a light which wonderfully transformed an otherwise commonplace countenance.

"You are right—ah yes, you are right!" he exclaimed, with an impulse which swept away the last traces of his initial frigidity. "Every word you say is true. Though you are not a soldier I see that you have the soul of one. We have long been convinced that you would end by following the example we have set to Europe. A great nation without a great army,—it is an impossibility nowadays. How rightly you have weighed the question; but it is a pity, after all, that you are not a soldier yourself!" and bending a little towards Millar, as though out of regard to possible listeners around them, he added a little lower: "It is the only thing worth being, believe me!" He was looking at the other with undisguised sympathy, through which a flavour of frank compassion pierced. Yet Millar, in this moment, felt able to bear even the sublime arrogance of the final remark. This was the first direct encouragement he was receiving to those views which he had cherished for so long in the depth of his mind, and the sympathy was so pleasant as to make even the compassion acceptable, independently of that irresistible impression which so obviously sincere enthusiasm never fails to produce.

"I see that you love your country as one's country ought to be loved," he was saying now, with a warmth of approval which made even his strong lips quiver.

They had drawn a little apart from the crowd, and Millar was beginning to hope for a prolonged conversation, when the first notes of a fresh dance tune rose above the buzz of human voices. Immediately the lieutenant's eyes began again to wander.

"You have set yourself a noble task," he said in a voice that had grown suddenly abstracted, "and I will do what I can to help you."

"Perhaps by introducing me to some of these gentlemen?" suggested Millar, looking towards the island of uniforms.

"I could do that too, but a ball-room is scarcely the place for discussions of this sort. But I can do better than that. I will take you to my Colonel's house; he is very hospitable, and you will meet plenty of military men there. Unfortunately he is not here to-night, or I should introduce you at once. We shall speak again about this. For the present you will excuse me."

He was gone this time for good, and presently Millar discovered him again by Thekla Elsner's side, obviously oblivious of everything except her neighbourhood.

"Quite the orthodox *coup de foudre,*" he reflected, and as he became aware that Hort, too, was watching the couple from a distance, he had the very vivid sensation of assisting at the first act of something that might not improbably develop into a drama.

The impression deepened when later in the evening he came across the engineer, evidently in search of him.

"I am going," said Hort, speaking between his teeth; "and I imagine that you must have had enough of it too by this time."

"Going already? Why, they are only just starting the cotillon!"

"I know. I don't want to see the cotillon. If you want to, you will have to manage for yourself."

"That means that Fräulein Thekla is gone," thought Millar, looking round him; but he had not looked far before he saw the white-and-gold vision just taking her place in the long row of dancers by the side of Lieutenant Pletze. He looked back quickly at Hort.

"Surely I heard Herr Elsner saying that they were going to leave before the cotillon?"

"That was when I was the partner proposed," said Hort, in a voice that was unsteady with rage. "Now that one of the demi-gods has deigned to stoop so far no doubt Elsner has found it in his heart to postpone the departure.”

Millar looked curiously towards Thekla. At this distance it was difficult to judge of her expression, yet her bearing did not appear to be that of a victim, and the flush on her cheek might be ascribed either to exercise or to pleasurable excitement.

“ Come along,” said Hort, impatiently at his elbow, “ we have nothing to look for here, either you or I; or do you imagine, perhaps, that because your coat is made by a London tailor it has a value in any of the eyes that look at you? How can it, since it is a mere black coat? Even the money in its pockets cannot save you from insignificance here. There, you are coming, are you not? ”

“ Yes, I am coming,” said Millar, infected without quite knowing it by the other’s grievance, which, to a certain extent, was also his own, for the sight of those triumphant uniforms had for several hours past been acting as an irritant even upon his nerves. He had certainly never been in any ball-room in which his personal importance had dwindled in so humiliating a manner. At home, he had always ranged as a distinctly successful “ lady’s man,” and without being inordinately presumptuous, he had somehow expected, even if only as a stranger, to be a rather more conspicuous figure here. It was his sense of national importance which was smarting, quite as much as his personal vanity, as he followed Hort out of the crowded room.

CHAPTER V.

Whatever sentimental preoccupations the ball might have brought him, Lieutenant Pletze proved to be as good as his word, and only two days later Millar, by his side, crossed the threshold of Colonel von Grunewalde, commander of the twentieth dragoons.

It was beginning to be high time to find an outlet for the anxiety which was devouring the exiled Englishman, to whom the perusal of German newspapers was becoming ever more trying. Ill-will, and nothing but ill-will, was to be found in the printed columns. Almost daily was the thick type brought out in order to accentuate English reverses, while skilfully disposed points of interrogation endeavoured to explain away the successes. With a little imagination the grins of delight could be read between the lines of the telegrams, the yells of joy heard in the very rustling of the sheets which Millar daily unfolded. "More English Defeats"—"Bad Luck upon Bad Luck"—"General Buller's Blunders"—"Lord Methuen's Muddles"—such was the style of the headings which met his eye, while the same popular paper which had published the "Pumped-out Lion" article, now assured him that the steps of fate which were hurrying Great Britain to—her doom were audible to anyone who was not stone-deaf; also that the British chariot was being dragged towards the abyss of destruction—"through an ocean of blood and slime!"

Whatever doubts he might have on the correctness of this prophecy, the mental isolation from which he was suffering had made him sensitive enough to be troubled by its mere enunciation.

"Feels rather like entering the enemy's camp," was Millar's reflection, as he followed his guide into Colonel von Grunewalde's drawing-room, and the first words which met his ear seemed to support this view.

"Every one of our lieutenants—what do I say?—every one of our cadets is expected to know what an English General, if he knows it at all, seems to know only by chance"—a tall, bony-looking man in uniform was proclaiming to several listeners. It was evident that a discussion on the latest military muddle in South Africa was in full flow.

At sight of the visitor, the speaker, who proved to be the master of the house, broke off short, turning his sun-tanned, skin-and-bone face towards the doorway.

Several minutes passed before, the introductions being over, Millar was able to take exact stock of the four people in the room.

About the grey-haired colonel there was evidently not much to be discovered; he looked what he was—a soldier to the marrow of his very conspicuous bones, and nothing but a soldier, precise in his movements, a little hard in his gaze, and plain in his manner. With this plainness of person the look of the room accorded strangely, for it, too, was of a simplicity which took Millar completely by surprise. In the midst of the luxuries of a rich manufacturing town, of which he had already had divers glimpses, this absence of fashionable draperies, this scantiness even of necessary furniture, gave the impression of an almost Spartan-like rigidity. What chairs there were were chiefly of basket-work, the one sofa, covered with a solid-looking rug, was of the sort most easily converted into a bed. For ornaments a few lithographs of horses on the walls, and various old-fashioned arms disposed symmetrically; on the floor a few horses' skins in guise of carpets; in one corner a book-shelf, of an obviously portable nature, and not a knick-knack to be discovered anywhere. It was only later on that Millar learned to see in this dearth of furniture, not so much a sign of scanty means as an idiosyncrasy of the colonel's, a certain military coquetry, which piqued itself on attaining the highest degree of mobility compatible with moderate comfort. To live in chronic marching-order had always been Colonel von Grunewalde's ideal; and so anxious was he to keep his baggage within suitable limits that every new purchase in the household was watched by him with deep distrust. In the regiment there existed a legend concerning a dressing-gown which his daughter had once presented him with at Christmas, and which had cost him a sleepless night. For a man who prided himself on being able to pack up his belongings in six hours, and who had worked out the details of the process on paper, the question of where that dressing-gown should be housed in case of a sudden marching-order, could not fail to be a serious one. Whether Madame von Grunewalde, if she had lived long enough, might not have succeeded in reconciling her pedant of a husband to the agreeable superfluities of life, remained an open question, since she had early received a marching-order into another world, which had perforce to be obeyed, and Hedwig, the daughter, left to her father's sole care, had been trained by him from infancy to walk in his own footsteps. Besides the colonel there were two officers in the room, comrades of their host, both big and red-faced, with the difference between them that while in the younger of the two this vividness of complexion appeared to proceed from a somewhat choleric temperament, in the other it spoke of unmistakable joviality.

The fourth person present, and the only woman, was that same Hedwig who had presented her father with the unappreciated dressing-gown. Small and slight, with warm brown hair curling about her temples, and white teeth flashing between eager red lips, she attracted instantly, without being able to bear a very severe analysis. Black eyebrows, placed piquantly aslant and very finely pencilled, gave to her irregular face the unmistakable stamp of energy, a suggestion which was borne out by the small but square chin. She had a delicately brilliant complexion and a very white forehead, which she was fond of spoiling by drawing up into fine folds on the smallest provocation, by this means putting her slanting eyebrows yet more and almost grotesquely aslant. Gaiety of temperament and health of mind as well as of body looked straight out of her grey eyes, while the brown curls and an extreme vivacity of movement spread a certain not unpleasant suggestion of boyishness over her small person.

"You would oblige me greatly," said Millar, turning towards his host, as soon as he found himself seated, "by taking up your conversation exactly at the point you dropped it at my entrance."

The colonel looked towards his comrades and abruptly shook his head.

"No; I don't think that would do," he said, bluntly; "you would hear no pleasant things."

"I have not come here to hear pleasant things, and I have heard so many unpleasant ones lately that my skin is growing thick."

"Oh, but we have not got *only* unpleasant things to say," broke in one of the red-faced officers—the jovial looking one, the facings of whose uniform proclaimed him to be major in the regiment of his host. "Though we criticise your tactics, there is but one voice as to your valour. All Germany is in admiration of British national spirit and in consternation at British military *naïveté.*"

"Are you sure you quite appreciate our difficulties?"

"I am sure, at any rate, that, until you found yourselves in the thick of them, you utterly failed to appreciate them yourselves."

It was the lieutenant-colonel alongside who was speaking now, in whom Millar subsequently learnt to know one of the stars of the Intelligence Department.

"So far from being an excuse, the existence of those difficulties only aggravate the offence of that criminal ignorance—yes, the downright criminal ignorance, with which your Government has plunged into this war. Don't say it came upon you unawares—that's nonsense. You know, or you ought to have known, that, sooner or later, the day would arrive when you would have to wrestle with the Boers for the upper hand in South Africa. Why did you not prepare for that day?" and he looked with angry inquiry at Millar.

"How could we arm openly in times of peace?"

"The Boers managed to arm—not openly—but that is not my meaning. There are other sorts of preparations. Do you know what I would have done if I had been the English Minister of War? I should have said to the Parliament: 'Give me a hundred thousand pounds—or else don't give them to me; but I warn you that each of these withheld thousands will cost you in time well nigh a million.' And if they had given it me, this is what I would have done: I would have begun by taking to hand the map of the Transvaal and dividing the country into a hundred imaginary districts. Then I would have picked out a hundred trustworthy men, I would have put a thousand pounds into the hand of each, I would have shown him the map and have said: 'That is your district. To-morrow you start for the Transvaal, you live there in any way you like for a year; at the end of that year I expect your report touching the entire situation in the area assigned to you—details of topography, means of communication, resources in men and horses, popular state of mind, etc., etc.' In a year I should have had the hundred reports, and should have been as exhaustively informed regarding the Transvaal as I could possibly be regarding London or Manchester. With those reports in my pocket is it likely that I would have shocked the military world by the spectacle of this huge unreadiness? How many of those costly mistakes do you think would have been avoided? How many millions would those thousands have saved? A great many, I can tell you."

And he glared at Millar as fiercely as though he held him responsible for all the shortcomings of British administration.

"May be, but those hundred men would have been hard to find in the English Army. That sort of work savours too much of the *métier* of spy to recommend itself to the British temperament."

"Then you could have found them in ours. Why, there are not a hundred, but perhaps a thousand, of our young officers who would literally have jumped at the chance. A year in South Africa—and a year's leave is always to be had—with a thousand pounds of good British gold in one's pocket—what a precious experience! What a break in the monotony of garrison life! *We* have long since given up indulging in the luxury of quixotic scruples touching the manner of collecting indispensable information; the times are too hard for that, the military race too hot. Very fine sentiments they are, no doubt," and the speaker gave a snort of unmistakable irritation; "but apt to come expensive both in money and in blood. No doubt you think it is a finer thing to rush into a conflict with your head down and the comfortable bandage of ignorance tied fast over your eyes."

He stopped short as abruptly as though he were in danger of choking. Into so visible a passion had the star of the Intelligence Department worked himself touching British density that Millar, marking the alarming hue of his complexion, wondered vaguely whether an apoplectic fit were not impending.

"Oh, it is a distressing spectacle that England presents us with!" ejaculated the jovial major, shaking a sympathetic head.

"And what a job they might have made of it!" sighed Colonel von Grunewalde.

In the eagerness of the discussion which had again got under flow Millar seemed to be forgotten, though he listened with strained attention, hanging his head a little as the criticisms fell thick and hard. But, though the words were severe, they were not malevolent. Here, as he quickly perceived, the military question was everything, politics nothing. To these professional soldiers it was obviously a matter of indifference *why* the English were fighting, all that interested them was to know whether they were fighting after accepted rules.

It was a chance pause in the conversation which enabled him again to put in a word.

"And the remedy for this sad state of things?" he enquired, for the talk had now drifted to the organisation of the English Army.

"There is only one remedy," said the colonel, decisively.

"Conscription?"

"Of course, conscription," said the three officers almost in one breath.

"That is my own conviction. I believe Lieutenant Pletze has told you of the mission I have set myself.

I believe I shall die happy if I can persuade my countrymen to the great step."

"Oh, is that the mission you have set yourself?" asked Hedwig, suddenly mixing in the conversation.

She had been sitting a little apart until now, and Lieutenant Pletze had been standing by her side. There was a second chair close by, and, having glanced in that direction a few minutes ago, Millar had vaguely wondered why the young officer had not sat down, since surely his height must make conversation difficult. While talking to him Hedwig had been forced to raise her eyes continually to his face—"but she does not seem to mind that"—had been one of Millar's passing reflections, on catching sight of those bright, upraised eyes. As for the lieutenant, his bearing showed an uneasy self-consciousness which Millar had not before observed in him; at this moment he did not look at all like the man who had waltzed with Thekla Elsner at the press ball.

"You want to make your nation into a nation of soldiers?" asked Hedwig, and with a movement of interest too frank to be forward, she changed her place to one nearer Millar.

"It is the task I have set myself."

"I hope you will succeed!" she said warmly. "I have seen nothing but English tourists, of course; but I have often thought what magnificent soldiers they would make."

"Herr Millar is sure to succeed," observed Lieutenant Pletze, obviously glad of the escape into general conversation. "Such ardour as his always succeeds."

"If it does, it will be only after a desperate fight. You don't know my countrymen, nor what it means to lay a finger on their liberty."

"You are not touching their liberty, you are, on the contrary, giving them a newer and the best sort of liberty: self-mastery."

"And not self-mastery alone," remarked the colonel, looking approvingly at his lieutenant—"you are teaching them order, punctuality, discipline, all qualities which will serve them in every station, in every occupation of life. The army does more for the minds of the people than all our schoolmasters together."

"And for their bodies, too," put in the major. "Look at what our lower classes were before conscription was universal, and look at them now! How many inches have we not gained in height as well as in breadth, and how many ounces in muscle! For the physically degenerate no better cure than two years of drill, and what country has not its proportion of these?"

"We certainly have more than our proportion!" reflected Millar, before whose mental eye there seemed to pass a procession of the hundreds and thousands of pallid, weak-eyed, and weak-kneed individuals, with the sight of whom life in a manufacturing centre had made him painfully familiar.

For the five minutes that followed he had nothing to do but to listen to a veritable panegyric of conscription, of which the advantages poured in upon him in gratifying but bewildering abundance. It was only when both the red-faced officers had talked themselves hoarse that they simultaneously paused, whereupon the company, obviously pleased with his intelligent attention, sat looking at Millar with unanimous approval, which was most conspicuous upon Hedwig's bright face.

It was she who now took up the thread of the discussion.

"Explain to me only this: the English love their country, do they not? How is it then that they are content to leave its defence to mere mercenaries, men who have nothing to lose but their life?—who become soldiers only as a resource against misery? How can you fail to grasp the fact that to give everything to your country, to whom you owe everything, is not only a duty but an honour, the highest honour to which any patriot can aspire?"

She looked at him with the same enthusiasm shining in her eyes that Millar had observed in the lieutenant's during their first interview; then without waiting for his answer:—

"And do you not see that the consciousness of this honour cannot help having an ennobling influence on those who enjoy it? Even we women are proud,—yes, I must confess that we are desperately proud—of being soldiers' daughters or wives; we would rather be that than the daughters of the highest officials or the richest capitalists in the empire. We live a higher, nobler life than they do, for the capitalists live only for their money, and even officials are not always incorruptible—as we have seen lately"—she was referring to the latest bureaucratic scandal, with which much reading of newspapers had made Millar familiar —"while our fathers and brothers and husbands live only for their country. You must not be astonished therefore if we hold together so strongly, and even if we appear to look down a little upon the others."

"But we do not really look down upon them all," remarked Lieutenant Pletze, unexpectedly. "You must not give Herr Millar the impression that we are as conceited as all that. When we find congenial elements among civilians we are not so absurdly exclusive as to stand aloof."

"But it is not often that we find them," retorted Hedwig, throwing him a glance of reproachful astonishment, her eyebrows drawn sharply aslant upon her ruffled forehead.

"Either I am a blind mule or else there exists some understanding—or misunderstanding—between these two," reflected Millar, as he marked how Pletze reddened almost guiltily under that look. Were there more complications than he had supposed in the drama whose opening he had witnessed in the ballroom?

At that moment the jovial major burst out laughing with a thoroughness which shook the basket chair.

"Who will deny now that we Germans are the best-natured people in the world—and the most simple-minded, too? Here we are hard at work encouraging this young man to preach conscription to his countrymen, while really we ought to be praying for the failure of his mission. We see pretty clearly, do we not, that the average Englishman presents the best raw material, both physical and mental, for soldiers; supposing it all were pressed into service, don't we know in our hearts that——"

"England would become the arbiter of the world's fate"—put in a new voice, coming from the doorway.

"Ah, General Russel!" exclaimed Hedwig, turning in her chair.

A tall, keen-eyed, bullet-headed old man in general's uniform, with a wiry grey moustache which had evidently once been yellow, had just entered the room.

"Russel?" asked Millar, looking enquiringly at Hedwig.

"Yes; a compatriot of yours, though a comrade of *ours.* He is retired now, but he has served in our army for more than forty years. You could not have a better informant than he is, and it will be pleasant to speak your own language. Come, I will introduce you at once."

CHAPTER VI.

"THE sight of a countryman in German uniform seems to astonish you," remarked General Russel to Millar, with his quiet yet keen smile, which wonderfully matched his quiet yet keen gaze.

The four other men had by this time sat down to a rubber of whist, and Hedwig had retired; so that the two Englishmen, withdrawn into a corner of the large, bare apartment, and speaking their own language, were as good as alone.

"I confess that it is a surprise to me—a most agreeable surprise."

Millar spoke with renewed animation. The discovery of a compatriot in the midst of this ocean of strangers was in itself unspeakably consoling, without reckoning the advantages of finding in him a German officer as well.

"Yet the seeming anomaly is easily explained. My wife was German. It was to please her that I settled here, but not alone to please her. It had always been my wish to be a soldier, but I was not rich enough to serve in the English Army; you know probably that we have arranged matters so practically that in order to be a soldier you have first to be a capitalist. It comes much cheaper to be a German soldier, therefore I became one."

"And have you become a German as well as a German soldier?"

General Russel shook his smooth, bullet head.

"No; I have never lost touch with the old country, although I am not sure that I could ever feel completely at home in her again. My profession has entered into my blood, you see, and here, even in retirement, I still live in the atmosphere I have been used to for forty years. I am alone now in the world, and to a soldier the movement of an army, even in peace, is the only real movement. Now over there the army does not move, it generally slumbers. Besides, it is not as easy as you imagine to uproot yourself at sixty, even if the soil to which you contemplate transplanting yourself is your original native soil. But you need not look at me so disapprovingly," and the general smiled again sharply under his yellow-grey moustache; "I doubt whether I am a worse patriot than you are yourself; I can assure you, at least, that my eyes are fixed on South Africa quite as anxiously as your own can be, just as for years past they have been turned expectantly towards the English War Office."

Millar heaved an impatient sigh.

"I have been hearing dreadful things within the last ten minutes, and not about the War Office alone. Tell me, are we really in so bad a predicament as they pretend? I know, of course, that the situation is pretty serious, but these men speak as though we stood on the verge of a national catastrophe."

General Russel, leaning with crossed arms in the window embrasure into which the two Englishmen had withdrawn, turned his face away from Millar's and for several seconds stared out into the street with eyebrows drawn deep down over his light green eyes. The penetration of those eyes, as well as the leanness of the neck issuing from the golden neckband, gave to his appearance something of the keenness of a bird of prey.

"If you are speaking of the momentary situation in the Transvaal," he observed after a moment—"then I think you need not listen too closely to their sinister prognostications; they see our blunders, but they do not quite appreciate the stuff we are made of. I have always felt that our national temper remains a sealed book to even intelligent foreigners. Do you know that after Buller's first failure to cross the Tugela there were plenty of German officers who half expected Lord Salisbury to telegraph on the spot to Kaiser Wilhelm, with the humble request for his good services, in getting us out of the scrape we had got ourselves into? No; you need not listen to them there; I have not any serious doubts that we shall manage to muddle through, after our time-honoured habit, in the most expensive and roundabout fashion, of course, but coming out all right at the other end. But if you are speaking of the military and political situation as a whole, then I do not think that my comrades can have painted it much blacker than it actually is. Why, don't you see"—and, jerking his head back from the contemplation of the street, he fixed Millar with his green, hawk-eyes—"don't you see that we are living in a sort of trance, paralysed by the spell of a situation which has long ceased to exist? Bluff is an excellent thing in its way, but unfortunately its days are over. Nowadays people are too fond of examining and analysing, to accept any situation blindly. Because hitherto we have ruled a quarter of the globe with a handful of soldiers we think that we can go on doing so, and never notice how, beside the constantly growing armies of our neighbours, that handful melts and melts by comparison until it almost ceases to count. Take the situation in India. To us—(when I say 'us' I am speaking as a German officer,—you must excuse me if I appear to you to be a somewhat dual personage)—the serenity of British self-confidence appears almost appalling. Because less than a hundred thousand white soldiers have hitherto succeeded in preserving nearly three hundred millions of subjects to the British Crown, it seems scarcely to occur to the average Englishman that they may not always suffice to do so. Russia's hungry gaze, her slow but deadly-sure movements, whose meaning is so obvious to every Continental politician, do not succeed in ruffling English self-confidence—not because we are prepared to fight with her for India, but because we prefer to believe that she will never fight. Do you suppose that there are a hundred Englishmen within Great Britain who realise that at this moment we are preserved from what would probably be a huge catastrophe by the personal goodwill of the Czar, or perhaps only by his philosophy? It is no secret, surely, that now, while I speak, two hundred thousand Russian soldiers are standing on the frontiers of Afghanistan; let Nicolas II. but raise his little finger, and I fancy that we shall find our hands fuller than we have bargained for. The secret of that gigantic Russian patience which says to itself: 'All Asia is a ripe apple which, when the right moment arrives, will drop into my lap, as surely as the ripe fruit drops to the earth—why hurry what will infallibly come?'—this secret seems open to all the world, except to England alone. With the mantle of national self-complacency wrapped tightly around us, with the veil of flattering delusions floating before our eyes, we move—with an unconsciousness which appals our friends, yet delights our enemies—through the ranks of nations armed to the teeth, and turning eyes of envy and of hatred upon us. It is a maddening spectacle, I can tell you,—a maddening spectacle!"

"To the English patriot, or to the German officer?" asked Millar, marking how the so carefully guarded quiet of the face before him was beginning to be pierced by symptoms of agitation.

"To both; for if it is painful to the Englishman to witness so dangerous a blindness, such a spectacle of military helplessness must infallibly irritate every real soldier."

"And our fleet?" asked Millar, somewhat angrily moved, in the face of what struck him as over-severe criticism, to stand up for principles which in his heart he condemned. "Do you give it no place at all in your review of the situation? Does not its existence alone justify a good part of our self-confidence?"

"It explains it at least; but as for justification, I can only return to what I said before: we are living in the belief of a situation which no longer exists. Once we could have slept safely without a soldier in the land and with only our ships as ramparts—nowadays no longer,—not because they are less mighty, but because they are no longer the only ones, or the only ones that count. We are still the mistress of the seas, but we can no longer play its despot, or we shall be able to play its despot again only when it has been proved that no combination of foreign navies—and I presume that you admit such a combination to be no far-fetched idea—can succeed against us. Until then, we would do well not to sleep too soundly behind our floating ramparts."

"Perhaps not; yet I cannot admit the situation to be quite as dark as you paint it. In all this, are you not overlooking the element of quality? Or perhaps you have become too much of a German to be able to appreciate our national advantages?" And Millar looked at his countryman well nigh vindictively. "Do you doubt that each one of our soldiers can do for two foreign ones?"

"I think, on the contrary, that he would probably do for three or four. I hope it is no national prejudice which lets me see in the Englishman the ideal soldier, the best, the highest fighting animal in the world, not only physically but morally, for if we have the defects of our qualities we have also got the qualities of our defects; and although pig-headedness may be disastrous in certain circumstances, it is undoubtedly in its place on a battle-field. The world knows this so well that the remark which Major Greiffingen was making as I entered scarcely covers the facts. It would be truer to say that each time England has pushed from her the question of conscription, after looking it in the face, all Europe has unconsciously heaved a sigh of relief. No, no, it is not the quality that needs raising, it is the quantity. I know that quantity just now is under an eclipse. Boer successes seem to push its importance into the background; yet despite the shadow of the 'new' warfare floating in the air, I remain of the old-fashioned opinion that, even with the highest quality attainable, one to two is a bad proportion, that one to ten is madness, and one to twenty suicide; yet it is in these proportions, or something like these, that we propose to stand up to the world. Tell me, have you ever clearly read the naked language of plain figures? Are you aware that the entire British Army, as it stands at this moment, represents barely three German Corps, and without anything approaching to the perfection of organisation which makes of each of these corps an instrument always ready to strike? And we have twenty-three of these instruments; even Austria, who possesses less than the fiftieth part of the land-surface covered by Great Britain, has fifteen of them, as ready and as efficient as our own. France has twenty-seven; while Russia, although she contents herself with thirty-five, might have almost as many more as she wanted. Do you know that to place each corps in the field, equipped down to the last man and to the smallest detail of transport and provision, requires at most ten days, and one signature? Do you realise that while in Germany, and with the army on a war footing, one soldier represents eleven inhabitants, while in Russia he stands for sixteen, and in Austria only for eight, in Great Britain he stands, even after the last resources have been drawn upon, for five hundred and nine?

"And in face of these figures there are would-be authorities among you who actually propose to melt down the army yet further; who advocate the 'picked men' system; who see salvation only in the improvement of quality. In colonial warfare, of course, quality goes before quantity, but can an empire such as ours be allowed to rest upon the mere vague hope of avoiding every European entanglement? Can we go on playing the masters of the world, with the consciousness that we are not fit to stand up to a civilised army? There is only one way to guard against that day, and that is, to prepare for it. And if that day comes, it is not national qualities, it is numbers and organisation and arms that will fall heaviest in the balance. Probably you have no concise ideas as to the destructiveness of our modern weapons. The time-honoured figure about the bullet-rain has been turned into a fearful truth by modern warfare. The most perfect soldier will go down under it as readily as the rawest recruit—one of them is as welcome 'cannon-food' as the other. Do you know that one single company of even only half-trained German infantry, consisting of not quite two hundred men, is capable of firing forty thousand shots in about ten minutes, and with a carrying distance of nearly four thousand paces? How do you want your picked soldier to bring out his picked qualities in the face of such an argument as that? Granted that he is a lion, and that the German infantry consists of nothing nobler than wolves, what can one lion do against two hundred wolves?

"And in spite of these unanswerable figures, the voice of the warner is cried down as the voice of an alarmist, and even military authorities are to be found who do not shrink from flattering the popular mind by strengthening it in its belief that we are invulnerable; why? because we have been preserved hitherto; because we have not measured ourselves with a European army for fifty years; but, above all, because we are English and all the rest are mere wretched foreigners; because we are too big to fall, forsooth, as if our very bigness were not the chief danger, just as the huger the colossus the more easily will it gravitate earthwards, if the feet it stands on be feet of clay. As yet no one has dared to give the necessary push, because the colossus looked so big and so alarming; but let them but discover the flaw in our basis—as those few thousand Transvaal peasants have half-discovered already—and shall we be safe for a day? Not if those soothers, those flatterers of national vanity, are allowed to keep the upper hand. A curse upon them all! They and their honey-tongues are worse enemies to their country than any Boer or Russian could ever be."

He stopped short in undisguised agitation, and for a moment the two Englishmen looked at each other, wide-eyed and startled, as though moved by a common fear. Millar, listening with all his might, was beginning to feel hot and cold, and almost giddy, from the mere sound of the figures that in such rapid succession had been, so to say, hurled at his head.

"Our present unhappy predicament proves something of what you say," he observed at last, after a moment of deep depression.

"Unhappy predicament! Is that what you call it? I call it the greatest good fortune that has come to us for centuries. If we had walked into the Transvaal as easily as we expected to, the chances are that we would have walked out of something else in no very remote future. No lighter warning than this could have got the better of the pig-headedness of John Bull, nor could have succeeded in shaking him up, and——"

"Converting him to conscription?" suggested Millar.

"Conscription!"

The accent in which General Russel repeated the word was so peculiar that Millar looked at him enquiringly.

"Yes; after all that you have told me I cannot doubt that you think as I do," and with eager haste the young man unburdened his mind to his countryman. While he spoke the smooth bullet-head nodded once or twice, as though in approval, but when he had finished, the General fixed him in the eyes and said, with evident sympathy, and with all his quiet returned,—

"Give up your idea. You will not succeed; and if you did succeed you would be conferring a very doubtful benefit upon the country to which you are so truly attached."

Millar, staring in consternation, could not immediately find a reply.

"But you are a German officer," he stammered at last, "and I thought——"

"That all German officers judge this point alike? As a rule they do; yet a few of us are given to personal observations; my own are not favourable to the 'blood-tax.' "

"Then you will not help me?" asked Millar, in reproachful disappointment.

"I cannot do so conscientiously."

"You mean to say that if you had the power in Germany——"

"I would revoke conscription? No, I would not. Conscription, as it here exists, seems to me an evil, but I acknowledge it to be a necessary evil for Germany, as well as for most Continental countries. England is almost the only land whose geographical position and national temper *seem* to offer an escape from the universal burden—mind, I do not say more than that the escape *seems* to be there—why not, therefore, profit by this circumstance?"

"But where are the evils you speak of? I have heard nothing but good of the system—that is, from reasonable people. Trade scarcely appears to suffer——"

"It does not suffer; but there are other considerations."

"The sacredness of the individual? Are you among those who see a slavery in the recognition of a national duty self-imposed by a free people?"

"I am not. The possible modifications in trade and a small sacrifice of individual liberty would be a light price to pay for the safety of the empire; but these are not the only results of turning a nation into a nation of soldiers."

"You are afraid that we should become too bloodthirsty?"

"Not in the least. Have not great wars ceased, or at least paused, since the creation of great armies?"

"Then what can possibly be your objection?"

"It would take too long to make that quite clear. My objection is a double one. Conscription, you see, is too wide and deep a measure, it touches national life too intimately not to act widely and deeply upon it. It is unavoidable that every subject within the empire should, so to say, adopt his attitude in the question. Broadly speaking he has the choice of two attitudes opposite to the army; either he identifies himself with it, or he does not. In so far as he identifies himself with it he inclines to approve and admire, often excessively, every action and every aspect of the army, and the result is that 'militarism,' whose very name has so evil an odour in British nostrils. The consciousness that every other class depends upon this one class for its very existence, that life and property can feel safe only in the shadow of the soldier's sword, tends to create that arrogance on one side, that too deferential attitude on the other, of which you will see plenty of examples, if you look about you," ("I have seen them already," reluctantly admitted Millar within his own mind)—"and this arrogance is fed by another consciousness; of all the classes of the empire the military class is the only one that does not, that cannot, gain money, in the common acceptation of the word, that is not exposed to the temptation of growing rich, that has not even got the possibility of staining its hands with that golden filth which sticks to so many civilian fingers. In these days of widespread corruption, of the licensed robbery of the stock exchange, of the vulgarities of trade competition, this enforced spotlessness unavoidably produces an exaggerated self-satisfaction, an instinctive looking down upon other perhaps equally honest classes, from whom no such high standard is required. These two consciousnesses together it is that have erected that social tyranny which the uniform undoubtedly exercises in Germany, where it would scarcely be an exaggeration to modify the well-known phrase about 'Man beginning at the Baron,' into 'Man beginning at the Lieutenant.' And now think of England, and imagine the effects of this sort of tyranny upon English society,— and the tyranny would infallibly arise, since it belongs to the very body and soul of militarism."

"And those Germans who do not identify themselves with the army?"

"Are its deadliest enemies, as our ever-growing socialist and anarchist groups prove; and not its enemies alone, but the enemies of the whole social structure of which the army is the result. That empire within the empire which the uniform creates is surrounded by inimical forces. The personal burden may be made as light as is feasible, the effects upon trade minimised to a vanishing point, but the 'blood-tax' will always provide the right point for focussing all the discontent which is loose in every land, and will always furnish the *cri de guerre* necessary for stirring the masses. We have no anarchists to speak of in England so far, but give them only a tangible and, above all, a showy grievance and they will crop up like mushrooms."

This time Millar's thoughts went straight to Gustav Hort and to his wild theories, and once more he felt silenced, though far from convinced.

"What then?" he enquired somewhat irritably, after a pause during which the declarations at the whist-table were the only words spoken in the room. "You have just proved to me that our army is far too small, and now you are attempting to prove to me that the only certain way of adequately increasing it would be a national misfortune,—what then? I suppose you do not mean to say that the colossus has got to fall?"

The quiet smile came back to the face of the General as he laid his hand on the shoulder of the young man.

"The colossus will stand so long as the world stands, if it so chooses, but it must stand on other feet."

"And these would consist of? I can scarcely conclude that you are one of those people who think that by holding out more bribes in shape of pay and good food, and adding a few more hundred thousand soldiers to our army, we should be coming up to the duties of our position."

"I am not one of those people."

"But then——"

"You are wondering whether I have got a substitute for conscription in my pocket, are you not? Well, I believe that such a substitute exists. But the subject is somewhat too large to be tackled at the tail-end of a conversation. I see that our friends have finished their rubber. We shall speak of this again."

CHAPTER VII.

"No, he is not right, he cannot be right," said Millar to himself as he stepped out again into the street. So deeply was he lost in reflection that it required Lieutenant Pletze's voice by his side to remind him that he was not alone.

"You were satisfied with your visit?" the Lieutenant asked twice over before Millar became aware of his presence.

"Very satisfied, and very grateful to you for having procured me such interesting acquaintances."

Pletze looked frankly pleased, but at the same time a little preoccupied.

"It has been a great pleasure to me to render you this service," he murmured, and seemed on the point of saying more, yet checked himself.

It was only a minute later, while Millar was wondering why his companion stuck so obstinately to his side, that, with a touch almost of embarrassment, he added:—

"I suppose you have few other acquaintances as yet at Mannstadt?"

"Scarcely any except my employer's."

"Ah, yes; I was presented to Herr Elsner at the press ball. He seems to be a very agreeable person. I should have no objections to continuing the acquaintance. Can you perhaps tell me at what hour

I should be likely to find Frau Elsner at home? Do you not find that she is a decidedly fine woman?"

"Decidedly," agreed Millar, whose moustache was fortunately thick enough to hide the smile which irresistibly rose (was it the agreeable father or the "fine" mother who was the magnet here?) : "and as for finding her at home, you will be quite safe if you go on Monday between four and six, since that is Frau Elsner's *jour.*"

"Between four and six?" joyfully repeated Pletze. "Thanks a thousand times. And now I am afraid I must leave you. You will find your way, will you not?"

"I don't see how I could refuse him the information," reflected Millar, as he watched the martial figure shouldering its way through the crowd. "One service demands another, after all."

But nevertheless a vision of Gustav Hort's gloomy face brought with it that particular sneaking qualm of conscience which assails us when we feel guilty of even the smallest act of treachery.

By next day the qualm had been sufficiently submerged by curiosity to let him discover that he could easily spare an hour for Frau Elsner's *jour.* He felt it would be a pity to miss even one scene of the drama at whose opening he had assisted. Of what he was going to witness that afternoon he had no serious doubt; the only question being whether he would be in time to assist at the Lieutenant's entry.

And he was in time. He knew it the moment he had swept his eyes round the large, luxurious apartment, in which the richness of the stuffs which covered the extremely solid sofas and chairs vied with the brocades and satins worn by the female portion of the visitors. Ample figures, florid countenances, unimpeachable frock coats, as many diamond shirt pins as *boutons* were to be seen on all sides, but the expected uniform—not yet.

"I do not see why I should not make hay while the sun shines, or rather before he begins to shine," was Millar's reflection, as having paid his respects to Frau Elsner, who was radiantly dispensing coffee and cakes—the manufacturer's wife never looked so happy as when she was feeding the hungry—he made his way to Thekla's side.

Clad in a pale grey, tight-fitting cloth gown, the goddess was only one degree less dazzling than she had been at the ball; less dazzling but not less beautiful, as Millar—noting how triumphantly her complexion bore the daylight, and how much bluer her eyes looked here than under the electric lamps—told himself. On nearer view there was yet another difference in them; for at the ball they had struck him as eminently calm, too calm almost for his personal taste, while now a faint unquiet was to be read in their enhanced brilliancy, and in the frequency with which they moved towards the door.

"Which of the two is she waiting for, I wonder?" Millar asked himself, and then, piqued ever so slightly by the blankness of the gaze which met his, added with a touch of ill-humour: "Anyway, it is not me!"

Nor was it any among the cloud of rubicund youths who hovered around with various devices for attracting her attention,—of this he felt immediately convinced. Despite their somewhat inconvenient presence, Millar was determined to make the most of the few minutes which presumably remained to him, in order to find out all that there was to be found out about this regal yet childlike creature who so strongly piqued his curiosity. "Has she a heart or not? Is she playing fast and loose with both of these men, or only with one? And if so, with which?" Such were the questions at work in his enquiring mind, as he boldly pushed a chair to her side.

The inevitable question came first.

"You have quite recovered from the fatigues of the ball, I trust?"

"Quite," said Thekla. The disappointment quickly vanished from her eyes. "When I amuse myself I never feel tired."

"And you amused yourself splendidly, of course; anyone could see that."

"Could they, really?" she asked, with naïve concern. "I do hope I did not look too ridiculously happy?"

"You looked happy, but not ridiculous."

"I can't help it, you see. I have been to so few balls as yet, and this one was so beautiful; such good music; such a good floor——"

"Surely you might add, 'such good dancers!'" suggested one of the bystanding youths, with an insinuating simper.

"Oh yes, some of the dancers were very good, but not all! There were even some who danced badly."

"No, she is no coquette," thought Millar, as he marked the perfect unconsciousness of the eyes that turned upon the speaker.

"Be merciful and specify," sighed another bystander, "else each one of us will be mentally beating his breast and seeing in himself the condemned dancer."

"But I don't condemn anybody," said Thekla, obviously distressed; and with the evident desire to be as conscientious as possible, she added: "Probably it was my own fault when I did not get on well. I ought to have accommodated my step to that of my dancer, I suppose."

"Then you will not specify?"

"No, no, I cannot. Do you dance very much in England?" she asked, turning to Millar, as though to a refuge from a passage of arms to which she did not feel equal.

"Yes; but we do our dancing in summer instead of in winter."

"Do you, really? Is it not too hot then? How different everything must seem to you here! Do you not feel terribly lonely and far away?"

She was looking at him with that same sympathetic interest, that same kindliness of smile which he had seen on Frau Elsner's face when she had been so anxious to know whether he had had enough to eat on the journey. It was exactly that gentle, almost motherly interest, with only the added charm of youthful shyness to make it irresistible.

"Anyway Hort has not fallen into the hands of a cold-blooded siren," was Millar's comment this time. "She may not love him, but she will certainly not illtreat him, and until the other one comes I shall not feel clear as to whether she does not love him, after all."

"Thekla," Frau Elsner's voice was heard just then; "Frau Scholl is asking for some music. You might let us hear those songs you were practising the other day. She has begun to study Schumann's 'Frauenliebe und Leben,'" added the beaming mother, turning to her neighbour.

"I don't think I know them well enough yet," said Thekla, a little flurried.

"Oh yes, you sang that first one beautifully last night. It is excellent practice for you to sing in company."

Dutifully, though evidently reluctantly, Thekla rose and went to the piano, where half a dozen volunteers were already making nuisances of themselves by pushing about the stool, settling the music-stand, and wildly turning over the pile of songs which lay there.

"No, no, she accompanies herself," said Frau Elsner, to a spectacled youth who had offered his services.

Millar, out of sheer compassion for the girl's evident flurry, had retained his place, from which, however, he had a good and not too distant view of the singer's face. The rose colour of confusion was still on her cheeks as she struck the first chords, in which Millar instantly recognised the accompaniment so diligently practised next door on the evening of his first visit. But even before the voice had had time to grow steady the flush was gone—faded to the pallor of a quite different emotion.

"Seit ich ihn gesehen, glaub' ich blind zu sein,
Wo ich hin nur blicke, seh' ich ihn allein.
Wie im wachen Traume schwebt sein Bild mir vor,
Taucht aus tiefstem Dunkel, heller, heller, nur empor.

"Sonst ist licht und farblos alles um mich her.
Nach der Schwestern Spiele nicht begehr' ich mehr;
Möchte lieber weinen, still im Kämmerlein,
Seit ich ihn gesehen glaub' ich blind zu sein." *

Thekla's voice was a fine mezzo-soprano, not by any means fully developed, but charged already with that abundance, almost superabundance, of sentiment, in which so many German natures seem to be steeped.

But for the obvious abstraction of the singer this naïve display of feeling would probably have struck Millar as almost indecent under the circumstances; but long before she had got to the end of the song, Thekla was evidently singing for herself alone, as the quiver of the fresh mouth, the far-off look in the blue eyes clearly betrayed.

"No doubt at all about her having been struck blind," mused Millar; "but did the event occur at the press ball or before? That is the question that wants settling. (Where is that man sticking, I won-

---

*Since I have seen him I think I am blind,
Wherever I look I see but him.
As in a waking dream his image floats before me,
Rises from darkest shadows, clearer and ever clearer.

All else around me has neither colour nor light,
The sisters' play has no more charm for me;
Rather would I weep alone in my room;
Since I have seen him I think I am blind.

der!) Is she thinking of black eyes or of blue eyes when her own grow so veiled?"

"The next one! The next one!" clamoured the group by the piano. "There is nothing like hearing them one ofter the other."

Thekla turned round quickly just then, for the door had again opened,—only another rubicund youth.

"But I only know three as yet," she said, a little dejectedly.

"Then let us have those three, at least."

"This one is much more difficult," pleaded Thekla; but her eyes were already lighting up to the sound of the so gloriously rapid chords. In what looked like a sudden ecstasy of feeling the triumphant notes poured over her lips:—

"Er, der Herrlichste von Allen, wie so milde, wie so gut!
Holde Lippen, klares Auge, heller Sinn und fester Muth!
So wie dort in blauer Tiefe, hell und herrlich jener Stern,
Also Er an meinem Himmel, hell und herrlich, hehr und fern."*

"Yes, that's all very well, but which of the two, which of the two is the distant, adored star?" Millar was putting the question to himself, when, at the conclusion of the song, Thekla raised her shining eyes to the mirror straight opposite. What she saw there chased the flush of animation suddenly from her cheek, to bring it back as suddenly and in tenfold force, for just within the doorway—having entered unperceived under cover of the vivacious music—Lieutenant Pletze was standing.

---

* He, the most splendid of all, so good, so mild!
Glowing lips, clear eyes, high mind and strong courage!
As up there in azure depths, clear and splendid, yonder star,
Thus he stands upon my heaven, clear and splendid, high and far.

"It is this one, then," said Millar to himself, having turned that way.

The appearance of the lieutenant, whose existence the bulk of the company discovered only now, had not taken effect on Thekla alone. A universal flurry in which mingled an element of astonishment had descended upon the rubicund youths as well as upon the brocaded ladies, betraying itself in an agitated rustling of silks and a general straightening of figures. As Frau Elsner, broadly smiling, advanced towards her latest guest, more than one questioning gaze was exchanged behind her ample back. Not even the proverbial eagle in the dove-cote could easily have produced more sensation than did the dragoon uniform in this room full of civilians.

Thekla, still beautifully blushing, had risen nervously from the piano.

"The third song!" pleaded the spectacled youth. "We have not had the third song yet!"

But she waved him impatiently aside.

"I cannot sing any more. No, I cannot sing any more to-day," she said, with a decision so unusual that it silenced all objections.

A few minutes later the lieutenant was enjoying the nearest approach to a *tête-à-tête* afforded by the circumstances, and after having saved all necessary appearances by a collective introduction to all the other ladies present, as well as by the exchange of a complete set of phrases with Herr Elsner, to whom his better half had sent a hurried message in his business room. To Millar's observant eye there were not wanting significant details about the attitude of the company, in especial about that of the *jeunesse dorée,* who, drawn together as though for mutual comfort, alarmed and even a little awe-struck, watched from a distance the development of an interview which they burned to interrupt, yet dared not; while the gold-rimmed eyeglasses of their mothers and sisters were turned again and again surreptitiously towards that fascinating uniform, which, to more than one woman present, appeared to decorate the room far more successfully than even the *gobelins* on the walls. And all the time the decorous father struggled vainly to appear decently indifferent, and the happy mother did not struggle at all, but beamed largely upon every one that approached.

"That settles the question about the 'distant, adored star.' Not so very distant, either, it would seem," thought Millar in his corner; "and yet it seems to me more than likely that when I first heard her practising those songs it was the other one she had in her mind's eye. Oh, frailty—and inconstancy too—thy name is most decidedly Woman! Would it be a charity, I wonder, to let Hort know that his game is up?"

CHAPTER VIII.

"Come with me and I will show you something," said Hort to Millar, one bitter March day, about six weeks after the press ball.

The two young men had been on the point of parting at the gate of the manufactory, and in some surprise, Millar acquiesced in what had apparently been an after-thought. It was long since the engineer had made to him an invitation of any sort, or had even appeared to notice his existence out of work hours. Dating from the momentous evening, on which, for a brief space, he had appeared in a different and unexpectedly amiable light, Hort had retired abruptly into himself, including Millar in the bitterly misanthropical mood which was adding every day to the gloom of his black eyes. Yet, despite the gruff answers he nowadays got to his questions, despite this apparently complete withdrawal of confidence, Millar felt far more compassion than vexation; for by this time Lieutenant Pletze's open courtship of Thekla Elsner was an established social fact; and, in what to the uninitiated might look like deliberate churlishness, it was not hard for him to discern the tortures of a real passion.

"Very well, I will come with you," he said, not particularly curious as to what he was going to see, but anxious to appear obliging, and not sorry for this opportunity of seeing more of his strange fellow-worker, who would not be a fellow-worker for much longer, since the fitting up of the new machinery was approaching its completion.

Without further explanation Hort pulled his collar up to his ears and began to lead the way, not towards his own lodging but in an opposite direction. It was blowing and sleeting together, what the Germans characterise as the genuine "dog-weather," and yet the streets, far from being deserted, appeared to be rather fuller than usual, and the more so the further they advanced. Groups of noisy individuals, often walking arm in arm, obstructed the pavement and seemed to be pouring in as well as out of every public house on the way. They were all young, as Millar vaguely observed, and many of them wore peasant dress.

On turning the corner of a large square at some distance from the centre of the town, Millar could not forbear uttering an exclamation. The groups which had pushed against him in the street had been but a foreshadowing of this mixed mob of men, which overflowed the square, standing thickest around a grey stone building, over whose entrance throned the Imperial German eagle, and who, if they were not talking or laughing, smoking or quarrelling, stood in morose silence, their eyes fixed on the grey building, as though they were awaiting their doom. Peasant coats were visible here too among the city dweller's attire, or more often beside it; for, despite the agitation running through the majority, the crowd appeared to be strictly sorted, after some principle which was clearest, no doubt, to the policemen and gendarmes circling around the groups, with alert gestures and watchful eyes, much after the fashion that a sheep dog circles around the herd of sheep which he has successfully hunted into a corner.

"What is it?" asked Millar, puzzled. "A fair?"

"Yes, a fair; but you will not guess of what."

"They don't seem to have anything to sell."

"Oh, yes; they have: Their limbs and their muscles, their youth and their strength. This is the great human flesh-market, where more business is done than on the gayest market-places, only that the seller here gets no payment for his wares."

"They are recruiting?" asked Millar, deeply interested.

"Yes. It is here the blood-tax is collected. Look at our future soldiers a little more closely, and tell me how much you discover of that enthusiasm for active service with which, I believe, you are generous enough to credit our nation."

"They don't look very downcast, at any rate," said Millar, as a hilarious individual—with hat cocked over one ear—lurched against his arm.

"That is not the merit of their patriotism, but of the alcohol they have been imbibing to steady their nerves. These are golden days for every tavern-keeper in Mannstadt, for it is an accepted axiom that a recruit has got to be noisy, else, don't you see? he might be suspected of cowardice. And since nine out of ten of them are feeling far more like tears than laughter, with the shadow of all sorts of partings upon them, the poor fellows have no other resource but the brandy-shop, beer alone will not suffice for this occasion. Besides, who would miss so good a pretext for a bout? Those who are not retained drink out of sheer delight at their escape, and those who are retained drown their preoccupations in spirits. To-night at least one-tenth of the town will be drunk, while the country roads for miles around will be made hideous by the long-drawn, falsely joyous yells of recruits returning home for their last six months of freedom. '*Galgenhumor*' is what we call this mood in German, and as much related to patriotism as I am to you. If you doubt what I say, look at the sober ones!"

Millar looked and began to make discoveries; for although there were plenty of flushed cheeks and loud voices among the groups, there were also pale faces and closed lips. Beside the erect heads there were bent ones, beside the artificially shining eyes there were some that were red with tears recently wept, and haggard with anxiety.

"They are leaving their mothers, their fathers, their sweethearts; exchanging the fields they have been used to all their lives for a barrack-yard. How do you want them to feel tender towards the country that demands the sacrifice? Must not even the least cultured among them feel deeply degraded by this driving together of men, after the fashion that cattle are driven together; this brutal taxation of merely physical qualities? And this is what you wish to bring your countrymen to! This travesty of an oriental slave-market! And here you see only the outside; if you could penetrate into the inside of that grey house you would be able far better to appreciate the horrors of the process; but I have no acquaintances in there where the uniform reigns supreme, so I cannot take you in."

"But I can," said someone close behind Millar, who turned to find General Russel at his elbow.

"You, General! What a surprise! What can you be doing here?"

"What you yourself are doing—taking a look at the recruits. It is a sight I have not missed for years; it keeps me in touch with my soldiering days, and is the best way I know of assuring myself that the quality of the army is safe—the physical quality, I mean. But if you want to see what your friend there calls the 'horrors of the process' come along with me."

"Let me introduce him," said Millar, but he perceived in the same moment that Hort had already disappeared, scared away, no doubt, by the sight of a uniform.

"And do you too call them 'horrors'?" he asked, following his guide through the crowd which fell back respectfully before the General's coat.

"Whatever they are they belong to conscription as inseparably as does the bark to the tree. You shall see for yourself, and perhaps you possess imagination enough to apply what you have seen to—other countries."

From out of the wide entrance of the grey building men were passing in small detachments, some with exultant, some with downcast faces, occasionally occupied in buttoning their coats and settling their neckbands, or shouting back an answer to some excited question addressed to them out of the crowd. The long, stone-paved passage into which they turned was likewise alive with men of all degrees, of whom a large proportion was still hastily completing its toilet, after the fashion of people who have just come out of a bath. A word from the General to one of the policemen on duty here suffered to open the door of the space in which the recruiting commission was at work.

The first thing that Millar experienced on entering at the heels of his guide was an overpowering atmosphere of condensed humanity; for, although the room was large, it was crowded, and had been crowded since morning, while, in obedience to the wishes of the government official—who suffered from rheumatism—the windows remained hermetically closed. Round a deal table at the upper end of the room the commission sat grouped, a mixture of military and of civilian uniforms, the place of honour being occupied by the infantry Major who presided. A Captain in the same uniform sat beside him, and two other officers of the *Landwehr* (home defence), as General Russel explained to Millar, occupied the other side of the table. The government representative, a resigned-looking old gentleman whose *idée fixe* was evidently draughts, and who glanced behind him nervously each time the door was opened, obviously had some difficulty in keeping up his interest in the proceedings, while two doctors, one in civilian attire the other in uniform, were hard at work upon the human material before them. The rest of the space was filled with men, most of whom were either dressing or undressing, and out of the crowd of which every few minutes an individual stepped, in answer to a name read off a list.

As Millar entered, a black-haired young man, stark naked, was standing in front of the table, breathing deeply and audibly, in obedience to the order of the military doctor whose ear was just then pressed to his ribs.

"Fit!" he proclaimed briefly, as he raised his head, and, after a short discussion at the table, the black-haired young man disappeared in the crowd.

"Paul Röthling!" called out the secretary of the commission.

This time it was a golden-haired cherub of a lad, who, blissfully unconscious of his unclothed state, stepped up smiling before the commission. Even the eyes of the deeply bored government official passed with a certain approbation over the youthful limbs that were as smooth and as delicate as those of a girl.

"Is this Paul Röthling?" asked the president, looking towards an elderly individual in a rusty frock coat; whose business as burgomaster of the community at present under examination was to identify the individuals.

"It is Paul Röthling," attested the burgomaster, with a profound inclination towards the table.

"Very slender looking," objected the civilian doctor.

"But sound," added his military colleague, loth to let even so small a fish as this escape his net.

"I don't believe he has the regulation measure."

"That we shall see immediately. Put yourself against that post, Paul Röthling."

"Two *centimètres* short," he proclaimed ruefully in the next moment, while a grin of delight spread over the cherub's face at the news of the happy release.

"You are free for the present, but mind you grow decently before next year!" and the disappointed doctor gave a half-reproving slap to the boy's bare shoulder.

"A capital weight he would have been for the cavalry," regretfully sighed a member of the commission.

The next in turn was a bloodless-looking youth, whose teeth were chattering, despite the atmosphere of the room, deadly shy, and evidently deadly ashamed of his Adamite costume. At the mere sight of him Millar felt a pang of something like fellow-feeling, for even without his clothes to give the conventional clue, the look in his brown eyes was enough to proclaim him as belonging to the comparatively cultured classes. On the commission, however, and in especial on the jocularly inclined military doctor, the sight of his confusion seemed to have a distinctly humorous effect.

"No reason for shyness!" he proclaimed, with another of his resounding slaps. "No ladies here, you know; and we've all of us seen plenty of your make before."

The examination, conducted amidst the burning blushes of the victim, merged into a dispute between the two doctors.

"Not fit, according to my opinion," said the civilian, decisively. "His chest is not affected, but there is every chance of its becoming so after a year of barrack life."

"Quite as much chance of his outgrowing the tendency. Lots of men owe their health to military training."

"Those who survive it, you mean," mumbled the other between his teeth.

But it was the military doctor whose opinion was decisive, so the result of a few moments' consultation was that Josef Windner was proclaimed "fit," although assigned to the *Landwehr*, as belonging to the third quality of recruiting material, of which the cavalry and artillery got in general the first choice, and the infantry the second.

"And now get back quickly into your shirt for fear of the ladies," said the jocular doctor, in high good humour at his victory.

As Josef Windner turned in nervous haste, Millar could just catch the look of mingled fear and anguish in the gentle brown eyes. Who knows what that lightly spoken word "fit" meant for him?

A magnificent young peasant followed. About fitness there would be no difference of opinion here, only as to the troop to which to assign him. This time it was the infantry, and the *Landwehr* Majors, who seemed inclined to wrangle over him, each anxious to secure so satisfactory an individual for his especial branch of service.

"Too big for the cavalry, but it would be a sin not to put him into a line regiment," declared the president. "Why, he is a born grenadier!"

"But since you are not short of material, why not give us the benefit?"

"A magnificent specimen," proclaimed the doctor, complacently passing the flat of his hand over the peasant's back and thighs, giving an approving pinch here and there to some especially conspicuous muscle.

It was the infantry that finally secured the prize, as it secured many more among those who, during the hour that followed, filed past the table, to the monotonous repetition of that indifferently spoken "fit," or "unfit," which settled so many fates, not only for two years to come, but often for a lifetime. When, at the end of that hour, General Russel said to Millar: "Have you had enough of it?" it was very emphatically that Millar answered:—

"Yes, quite enough. It is just a trifle too like a cattle-market for my taste."

Once out upon the square, he did not speak immediately, principally because he was feeling irritated, against whom or against what he could not exactly have said; perhaps against both Hort and the General for having showed him all this, perhaps against the entire recruiting commission, whose doings had undoubtedly taken a good deal of bloom off his ideal of a national army.

"And yet there is no other way," he angrily reflected, and in the next moment started, for his companion was quietly remarking,—

"This way will not do for us, but I believe there is another one." Had he spoken aloud?

"I know that you have a plan, but you have never explained it to me."

"Of course I have a plan. In a period when every second journalist has got an army reform plan in his pocket, I hope I am not so hopelessly unfashionable as not to have tried my hand at the game! I live close at hand: if you will accompany me down the next street we can continue the conversation we began in January. It should have been continued before, if I had not been laid up."

It was an attack of influenza, which, to Millar's disappointment, had kept the General invisible ever since their first meeting.

"And your plan?" asked Millar, scarcely seated in General Russel's small but comfortable smoking-room, and too impatient to waste time. "But I warn you in advance that I don't believe in it."

"My plan, which is not by any means my plan alone, is a form of that same compulsory military training which you must have seen advocated in more than one English paper."

"I have seen it, but I have never been able quite to grasp their idea."

"I cannot answer for *their* ideas, of course, but according to mine, our whole school plan would have to be re-created in such a fashion that every boy born within the British empire acquires, with the same undeviating certainty that he acquires reading, writing and arithmetic, the first indispensable elements of a soldier's training—physical as well as mental, but principally physical; and of course, exactly proportioned to his class of life and degree of culture. As a logical result of this reform in education, every boy, on leaving school, would possess at least the rudimentary qualities for either a soldier of the rank and file, an under-officer, or an officer, according to the class of school he has attended."

"And what is he to do with these rudimentary qualifications unless he be compelled to put them at the disposal of his country? And the moment he is compelled we have reached conscription."

"He will be compelled, but only in the contingency of his services being required, which, in nine cases out of ten, they would not be. In ordinary times he would scarcely remark that he is a soldier, for the amount of training which, according to my opinion, would be required to keep him efficient, cannot be said appreciably to interfere with his life. I calculate that three rounds of three or four weeks' training in ten years ought perfectly to suffice. It is the peace service of a large army that falls so heavily upon a nation; it is from that that springs that most objectionable militarism which we want, at all costs, to avoid; it is its irksomeness, its costliness, its apparent uselessness, which breed all the evils attaching to Continental conscription. In the moment that the war fever seizes the land the small grievances disappear. According to my idea, our army, in time of peace, would be nothing but a skeleton army, the framework of which must, of course, consist of perfectly trained soldiers; volunteers who have bound themselves to at least ten years' service, and the ranks of which would, at the given moment, be filled up by the nation, of which each single unit has imbibed military principles together with its A B C."

"And you mean seriously to tell me that such embryo soldiers as these would even count in warfare?"

"I mean to tell you more than this—that in certain cases (provided only that they are physically fit) they would be of more value than the peace soldier of Continental armies, whom a monotonous garrison life has reduced to a species of automaton, in whom patriotism has been blunted by a sense of compulsion. My future British soldier, as I picture him, comes indeed rather raw to his work, but also fresh; stimulated by the excitement which the prospect of immediate action awakes in the breast of every Englishman who is not a craven, and with the consciousness of a great national need upon him. What he lacks in training he will make up for in spirit, and in *numbers*. I cannot help returning to this much-disputed point. Small armies are just now in high favour among us—theoretically, they are more mobile than big ones, we are told, and therefore must be more effective. A mere juggling with words; for a big army can be divided into as many small armies as you like, and each one be trained to double about with the agility of a greyhound; but nothing can swell the small army into a big one if the numbers be not there. You cannot do away with the advantage of physical preponderance, the vulgar weight of vulgar numbers. And despite all the discoveries we are making in the Transvaal, despite the collapse of close formation and the apotheosis of the entrenchment, I am firmly convinced that this will remain as true of the wars of the future as it has been of those of the past. So long as men's quarrels have been, the man with the thick stick in his hand has always had a pull over the man with the thin one, and not all the smokeless powder in the world will alter the fact that twenty rifle-shots are likely to do more work than one.

"Perhaps you have not forgotten what I told you of the efficiency of our infantry rifles; this will partly explain to you why nowadays there are voices raised among us—voices of far weightier authority than I pretend to be—who maintain that we take too much trouble and spend too much money in teaching our soldiers to shoot; who insist that it is the number of shots fired, and not a shade of better or worse shooting in the individual soldier, which will be decisive. Let him but know how to handle his rifle with confidence, and he is a useful soldier already, provided he has enough comrades. Numbers! There you have it again! I know I am preaching what ranks just now as heresy! I know that at this moment half England has run away with the opposite idea. The marksmanship of the Boers has gone to most heads, and the present ambition of every patriot is to turn himself into the nearest possible copy of a Wilhelm Tell. And, mind you, this course is advocated by the very people who tell us that in the war of the future we shall mostly be firing at an invisible enemy—proof enough of the utter bewilderment of the prophets' minds. It is the old story of drawing general conclusions from concrete cases. This war is a war of marksmanship; of lurking among boulders, and picking out conspicuous enemies; but nothing proves that in the next war we shall again be lurking behind boulders, and not rather marching across open plains to meet an overpowering enemy. Organise rifle clubs, by all means; they can only do good, they may in certain cases do incalculable good; but do not think that they alone will save the Empire, for when it comes to a struggle with a European foe, their bullet-rain will sweep away whole regiments of marksmen; and the vital question will be whether there are others to take their place—Wilhelm Tells or no Wilhelm Tells—small matter! Let there only be enough of them, and we are safe.

"And about there being enough and far more than enough, there surely can be no doubt to anyone who takes the trouble to consider a few plain figures. Can an empire of close upon five hundred millions of subjects be embarrassed where to take an army from? Even supposing that only every fortieth subject of the British Empire were called upon to serve in war time—a proportion which is far less exacting than that followed by the rest of Europe—Great Britain would be able to create an army of more than *eleven million* of men. But as, of course, nothing like this number, nor the half of this number, nor even the quarter, would be required, it follows that the widest concessions could be made to private and family circumstances, and that nothing but the physically flawless, the very pick of the nation, would be called into action—a circumstance which alone gives us an immense advantage over Continental countries."

"If I could feel sure that these physically flawless individuals deserved the name of soldiers——"

"If I, a soldier of the most exacting army in the world, tell you that they do, ought you not at least to look at the idea a little more closely? It is years now since, slowly but surely, the conviction has been creeping into military minds, that most of our peace work is useless, or at least superfluous. The two years' service is an outcome of this tendency; but it will not stop there. If I was sure of living another twenty-five years I would gladly wager with you that by that time not only one, but all Continental armies, will have come down to one year."

"Then why not propose the one year service to the English, and frankly adopt conscription? Who could call the burden heavy then?"

"Just the same people who call it heavy now, for the stigma would remain, the sense of visible compulsion without the visible necessity. You may call my plan conscription in disguise, but it has this advantage over conscription that, by escaping the pernicious peace service, it steers clear of the most susceptible points in the English national character. To my mind it is quite clear that England, sooner or later, will have to acquiesce in at least this modified form of conscription; the great question is only whether she will do so before a national disaster or after it—that is *with* it or without."

"And the details of your plan? I seem to see countless difficulties ahead."

"So do I; but most difficulties can be met. Some day, when I feel in the right mood, I shall put down my ideas on paper; rough ideas they are as yet, and doubtless very imperfect, but who knows whether they may not succeed in converting you!"

"Perhaps," said Millar, with a sudden access of reserve. "There is much in what you say, but there is not enough for me. Our recent successes in South Africa have comforted me as regards the present, but they do not reassure me as to the future. I give you fair warning that I am not yet converted from the idea I brought over with me."

"You still consider that, for the sake of conscription in the European form, the evils of militarism should be tolerated?"

"I am not sufficiently convinced of its evils."

"How much longer do you stay in this country?"

"About ten months."

The General smiled quietly, playing with his cigar.

"Use your eyes well during these ten months, and your ears, too. Perhaps at the end of that time you will be better convinced than you are now."

CHAPTER IX.

An unblinking June sun was beating down upon the railway embankment, at the foot of which some thirty men squatted on the grass, devouring their hard-earned midday meal, while the engineer superintending the job now in hand sat likewise on the grass, reading something out of the newspaper he held in his hand, and occasionally interrupting his reading to exchange some comment with the men closest at hand.

The grass still preserved its first tender green, soon to be dimmed by the dust and stained by the smoke of the engines which would pass this way, and the hawthorn blossoms still lingered in the hedges, but Gustav Hort—for it was he—had eyes for nothing but the printed letters on the page.

It was some weeks now since, having terminated his engagement to Herr Elsner, he had been at work upon this new line—one of the many local ones that were beginning to radiate in all directions from the prosperous Mannstadt. With a mixture of intense relief and intense regret he had turned his back upon the manufactory, and with it, upon all further connection with the Elsner family. Thekla being lost to him—and he knew now that she was lost—the Elsners became again what, for a brief space they had ceased to be to him—the detested capitalists, whose mere title of possession spelled robbery. He had, for a moment, nursed a wild hope which he now recognised as wild; and, hastily dropping it, returned to his former mental occupations. Most likely he was not himself aware of the deepened bitterness, the intensified convictions, with which he returned. He had always believed that the world was falsely ordered, but never before had he believed it with such a rage of certainty as now; he had always hated those elements which he held in first line responsible for this false order, but the hatred had not tortured him as it now did, to the point of robbing him of his appetite and sleep.

Gustav Hort might almost be said to have imbibed his views of life together with his mother's milk. The son of a philanthropically inclined doctor, who had spent his health and his strength, as well as all the money he had ever possessed, labouring among the poor of Berlin, Gustav had, from his earliest childhood, heard speak, continually and persistently, of the miseries of the lower classes. In the family circle, at the family dinner table, at morning and at night, it had been the common theme of conversation. The items of news which the doctor—fanatically attached to his work—brought home of any particularly poignant cases he had come across, were almost the only news from the outer world that reached the small, retired household. Here Gustav heard of children of his own age afflicted with indigestion by the sawdust which they had mixed with their food, in the hope of stilling the never-ceasing craving of an empty stomach; of women rising within the same hour of their confinement for fear of losing even one day's wages, and with it the dinner for the morrow. He got to know by heart the names of the diseases that are contracted by the workers in the india-rubber, the copper, the paper trades, and became an adept in calculating the proportion of needlewomen who yearly succumb to the strain of turning the wheel of a sewing-machine during eighteen hours out of the twenty-four. His mother's sympathetic interest, occasionally her tears of compassion, served only to drive those images deeper into his extremely sensitive imagination. Was it a wonder if he grew up with a burning resentment against those classes which, as it seemed to him, took all the good things of the world to themselves and left to those outcasts only the bad ones?

In this resentment his own personal sense of grievance began by playing a merely subordinate part, since, the son of a generously unselfish father, he possessed in his heart a deep well of this same generosity, which at that time had not yet been dimmed by the struggles of life. That same noble sense of fellow-feeling which had made of the little, hard-worked doctor, one of the unrecognised apostles of the world, moved in the young man's heart, yet with different results. For where the father had been content resignedly to attest the presence of the evil, the more wide-awake and restless spirit of the son began to look about wildly for a remedy. His father had never accused, he had only lamented, and remedied whatever came near enough to him to be remedied, and his mother had only wept. But Gustav felt that he could not rest until he had fastened the guilt of this monstrous wrong on someone or something. He had no talent for resignation.

Adolescence put him at the turning point of his life. At that moment nothing but an immense pity filled his heart, so immense and so full of yearning towards the unfortunate portion of mankind that it seemed a mere toss-up whether he would become a priest or a revolutionary. It was his surroundings which decided for the revolutionary. By his father's wish he had entered on technical studies, and the socialistic elements with which University life brought him in contact, soon threw his vaguely rebellious thoughts into their own mould. Once caught by the current, there was no turning back, and so little did he struggle against it that before the close of his studies he had attracted the attention, not only of his especial *clique* of fellow-students, but—what was more inconvenient—of that of the police, whose paternally watchful eyes seldom fail to mark any fresh danger to the institutions of the Fatherland.

Then, just as the hazy yet fierce ideas that floated in his brain were beginning to mature there came the inevitable call to arms—to those useless arms of peace whose necessity appeals to so few men. There was no escape, of course, from that one year's service—the privileged abridgment which his University studies had earned him; but, light though the burden might appear to other eyes, it clashed too directly with his half-formed theories of life not to intensify tenfold his sense of rebellion.

The experiences of that one year had done what was still required finally to fix his hatred of society, a hatred which had sprung from a charity gone wild. The paternally watchful police had, of course, not failed to pass on to the military authorities their suspicions regarding the political opinions of this new recruit, with the consequence that, from the very first day he found himself in uniform, the ex-student was made to feel not only that his own hand was against every man's, but also that every man's hand was against his. Though he knew it not he had entered the ranks with a mark against his name, and at every turn was conscious of mistrustful glances, of an ill-concealed grudge. It was at this period that purely personal considerations began to overshadow his special form of philanthropy. The anger which he felt against society in general began to turn itself more especially upon the uniformed portion of it, in first line upon the fat, tipsy, but painfully efficient sergeant, under whose direct orders he was placed, and who seemed to take a special and detailed delight in professionally torturing this superior looking individual, presuming to consider himself his superior in education. Merely by belonging to his class he awoke the sergeant's soldierly wrath. Had not enough of his sort passed through those thickset, but efficient, hands, and generally with that same supercilious look upon their faces? It was a category of person in whose superior book-learning and whose inferior drill the sergeant instinctively recognised an hereditary enemy to his race. This one was even worse than the others, at least in the opinion of Sergeant Blum, whose habit it was yearly to select a victim among this lot of privileged individuals, let off far too easy—as he considered—and who, merely on the strength of this privilege, were bound to be hateful to his honest soldier's soul. This particular year resolved itself into an obstinate though tacit mental duel between Hort and this support of the army; the one burning with the loyal desire of catching this evidently disloyal subject in the smallest act of insubordination, the other quite aware of this ambition, and, although consumed inwardly by a rage that often bleached his cheek and shook his strong hand, as firmly determined not to give him the satisfaction aspired to. The ingenuity of Sergeant Blum in inventing humiliating remarks and devising galling commands might awake the wonder of the company and the admiration of his colleagues, but, whatever might be passing inwardly, outwardly Hort did not flinch. *"Auch dieses wird vorübergehen!"* (This also will pass) was the formula he had adopted wherewith to fortify his soul in moments that would otherwise have appeared unendurable.

Yet the year was not to end without Sergeant Blum having his desire.

It wanted but two months to its completion when a small incident—scarcely the shadow of an incident—afforded the very slight pretext which was all that was required.

One morning on parade the opportunity came. Hort, ready before the hour, had been stealing a few minutes with his favourite Rousseau, a small volume of whose essays he had kept by him as a solace in his present trials. The order to form ranks had surprised him so suddenly that there was no time to secrete his treasure anywhere but inside the breast of his uniform, where he trusted that its slight bulk would escape detection. But alas for anyone who pinned his hopes on anything being overlooked by Sergeant Blum's eyes! Bloodshot though they were, they were as efficient as the rest of his person. In his very first turn down the ranks he stood still before Hort.

"And that button?" he exploded, pointing with a short finger at one which Hort in his haste had omitted to close. "You imagine you are in your dressing-gown, I suppose, instead of the Emperor's uniform? Ha! Shut it this instant!"

With teeth tightly ground together Hort obeyed. But the sergeant's eye had made another discovery—that of a suspicious looking bulge on the left side of the coat.

"What's that? A lump under your uniform! Lumps are against the regulations. A packet it looks like. Letters from his lady-love, I suppose," and he looked round jocularly at a bystanding corporal, who dutifully tittered. "Hand it out on the spot!"

Hort stood immovable, not having consciously formed the resolve of not obeying, but simply because to obey appeared to him this time almost impossible.

"Ah, you won't, will you? Then I'll fetch it myself!"

Without knowing it Hort made a movement of instinctive resistance, then, with the swift recollection of his moral helplessness, became rigid once more, while only a spasm passed over his set face as the sergeant, tearing open his uniform, thrust his fat hand into its recesses to bring it out triumphantly with Rousseau in its greasy clasp.

"A book!" he uttered, with a mixture of contempt and disappointment, which in a calmer moment might have struck Hort himself as comical. But he was not calm now, though he stood so still, with his hands by his sides and his eyes fixed hard upon his superior's face, exactly as the regulation required. Perhaps the sergeant himself read something like murder in those eyes, for, during a moment, he stood as though thunderstruck; but only for a moment. In the next he was himself again, more than himself, for he had stumbled upon the opportunity which he had been looking for for ten months.

"That's it, is it?" he roared exultingly. "Books during parade hours! As though all the book-learning in the world would ever teach you how to shoulder a gun! You can't live without your books for an hour, can't you? I'll teach you to live without them and without a good many other things too, for forty-eight hours and more, if I can make it! You wouldn't hand out that book, wouldn't you? You wouldn't obey orders! It had to be taken from you, well-nigh by force. I'm going to the captain. High time indeed that you should make acquaintance with our beautiful lock-up! A pity really, it would have been, if you had left us without knowing how pleasantly a day or two can be passed in there!"

What version reached the captain's ears Hort was, of course, not in a position to ascertain; perhaps no very "cooked" version was required to convince the authorities that the article marked "dangerous" was at length showing signs of breaking out. Be that as it may, the fact remained that Hort, being convicted of grave insubordination, spent the next forty-eight hours in a small cellar-like locality, just sufficiently lighted to let him distinguish the bare board which figured as bed. Here, in the solitude of a stuffy cell, with an empty stomach—since fasting formed part of the punishment—and with nothing to keep him company but flies by daytime and rats by night, he had ample leisure to reflect to his heart's content upon the arrangements of the world. Perhaps it was the fault of the empty stomach that these reflections were not very coherent, and yet the result was coherent enough; for it was during these forty-eight hours that his rage against society in general assumed its ultimate shape. When he left that cell, it was with all the hatred within him finally concentrated, and having, so to say, found its focussing point.

Free of the uniform, he carried the distaste of it back to his ordinary life. Everything that even distantly savoured of the barrack-yard was enough to turn his mental stomach. The very slovenliness with which he carried his fine figure was a sort of unconscious protest against that hateful drill, so unwillingly undergone, so gladly forgotten.

Hort had been earning his bread painfully for some two years when Fate led him to the door of Herr Elsner's manufactory, and, by the same process, to the feet of Thekla Elsner. He had taken little account of women until now, and for this very reason threw himself into this new passion with the whole vehemence of a nature which, living on impulses, counts no costs. She belonged to the rich ones of the earth, and therefore ought to have been a natural enemy, but from the first moment that her royal beauty had dawned upon him—that mixture of majesty and of freshness—she had been to him nothing but herself. It was not the capitalist's daughter that he saw in her, but the realisation of his dream of womanhood.

When he found his mental balance again, sufficiently to take account of the gulf which yawned between them, socially as well as financially, it was not to feel immediate discouragement. Audacity was in his blood, and conscious of being the manufacturer's superior in education—the only thing that counted in his eyes—he could see no reason to despair of winning his daughter. And her money? That indeed must remain a stumbling-block to a man of his principles, unless it could be turned into a stepping-stone. When contemplating the possibility of his marriage, Hort had always done so with the latent resolve in his mind of telling Thekla's parents openly and without disguise, that whatever money they chose to give to their daughter would be employed in the service of the socialist cause, with which he was beginning to get into closer touch. This would probably lead to their withholding their money altogether. Well then, he would do without it. If the girl loved him she would, of course, be ready to sacrifice her fortune for his sake; in this simple light, at least, did the matter appear to Hort's (in some ways) curiously unsophisticated mind. If the girl loved him—yes, upon that turned everything. There had been a period in which the hope that she did appeared to be neither unreasonable nor over sanguine. During the earlier stages of their acquaintance, there had been moments in which it was difficult to doubt that Thekla's distinctly inflammable imagination had been permanently caught by the fearless bearing, the ardent gaze of this strange acquaintance, who was so unlike the usual *habitués* of her mother's drawing room,—even by his rebellious words, and the half-uttered hints which dimly opened to her vistas of a life whose existence she had, in her comfortable home, never suspected. A mind fresh from the nursery is easily harrowed by the account of any sort of suffering, if ably portrayed; and if Herr Elsner could have followed every word of the conversations which at this time took place between his daughter and the young engineer, whom Frau Elsner's rash hospitality began by seating all too frequently at the family board, it is probable that what remained of his highly decorous hair would have stood straight on end. Socialistic ideas insinuated into the mind of a daughter of his! And, if it had been the mind alone, but there were not lacking symptoms that the heart itself was affected. Well was it for the manufacturer's peace of mind that he remained in ignorance of various small incidents of this period. Thekla herself, thinking of it later, was aghast at her own imprudence; though, thank Heaven, she had stopped short of the crowning imprudence of a binding word.

It was at the moment when Hort was beginning to hope for that word that the press ball took place, bringing with it the death-blow to his dreams. They died no lingering death; rather they expired completely in an instant, and almost without a struggle. He did not even doubt the sincerity of the interest which Thekla had taken in him, but he understood that a newer and greater interest had succeeded. Her enthusiastically inclined mind had succumbed before the uniform, as it had just escaped succumbing before the faith into which he had begun to initiate her. It was not against her that he felt most incensed—for her he could still find excuses; but it was against the man in uniform who had dazzled her young eyes.

The uniform! Again the uniform! At every turn of his life it confronted him inimically. It had played him many an evil turn before now; was it to rob him of his happiness as well as of his self-respect?

In grim silence he withdrew from a contest which his quick eye recognised at first sight as unequal; but the grudge within his heart only struck deeper, more ineradicable, more clinging roots. If he had not loathed the very name of the army already, he would have loathed it now for the sake of one man in it. The personal element had by this time entirely gained the upper hand of the selfless considerations of former days. Although he might not himself know what put the new sting into the words which he had grown accustomed to sow, somewhat at random, among the men with whom his work brought him into daily contact, and without any more immediate object in view than that of relieving his overburdened feelings, yet at moments the sharpness of that sting surprised himself. A railway embankment in the open country, with no uncalled for listeners at hand, is a decidedly convenient place for making remarks of a sort not calculated to catch the fancy of a German policeman; and this circumstance, as well as the many willing ears to be found among his hearers, was chiefly responsible for the sort of informal campaign here being conducted. For, whereas it is almost impossible nowadays to find a gang of Continental workmen, anywhere in the neighbourhood of a big town, quite free of socialistic elements, this particular gang, owing perhaps to the presence of a few ready-tongued Italians, was particularly rich in these ingredients. All of these men lived painfully from hand to mouth, most of them had some particular and personal grievance against Fate. What then could be more welcome than the opportunity of freely discussing these grievances, with the pleasant and unusual addition of the comments supplied by a cultured mind? The mere fact that this man of culture stooped to talk with them as equals had, by flattering these half-educated spirits, raised him to the position of an oracle. For weeks past it had now become the custom to enliven the midday pause by extracts read out of one of the newspapers which the engineer invariably carried in his pocket, and by the discussions that arose therefrom. Sitting on the grass in their midst, with a circle of attentive eyes fixed upon him, Hort enjoyed at these times a curious and enticing sense of power—the almost alarming consciousness that all these minds were subject to his, that he could turn all these struggling thoughts into whatever channel he chose, could teach these primitive searchers after truth any lesson that he wanted them to learn.

One lesson, in special, he could not grow tired of driving into their minds, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, in season and out of season. He was teaching it them again on this warm June day on which a newspaper paragraph had met his eye, of such startling appropriateness that even a less biassed mind than his could scarcely have refrained from pointing the moral. This was the reason why the black of the printer's ink quite blotted out for him the greenness of the summer landscape.

"The Newest Sword Affair" was the heading which had infallibly arrested his attention. It was the account of a street incident of a sort not very infrequent in the annals of every Continental army; commonplace to the verge of vulgarity, yet entailing consequences of well-nigh tragical import. Nothing more than a chance meeting in the street between an officer and a couple of shopkeepers out on a Sunday spree, one of whom—possibly not perfectly sober—had brushed somewhat roughly against the officer's arm; a sharp reprimand from the officer; a sharper retort from the shopkeeper; an insulting word fallen, even a stick raised threateningly by one of the shopkeepers—such, at least, was the military version—and finally the sword torn out of its scabbard and descending with such force upon the adversary's head, that the unfortunate young man had sunk on to the pavement in what the newspaper paragraph described as "a bath of blood," and that his life was at this moment still hanging in the balance.

"And this happens in times of peace," commented Hort, the red of a sincere indignation mounting to his sun-tanned cheek; "in full daylight, in a country which aspires to march at the head of civilisation!"

"But what was done to the officer?" enquired one of the youngest of the workmen, a bright-eyed, apple-cheeked youth, who was hungrily devouring his bit of sausage. "If the man dies, will he be tried for murder?"

"For murder? Not a bit of it! Nothing at all will happen to him if the man doesn't die, and even if he does, the other will get off with a merely nominal punishment—perhaps a change to another garrison."

"But why? How can that be?" enquired several voices together. "If one of us killed a man he would certainly be hung."

Hort laughed harshly. "One of you? Yes. But you are not officers; you have no uniforms to your backs. Don't you know yet that under cover of a blue coat quite a lot of things can be done with impunity which would be crimes if committed in a black one? This officer will say, of course, that he was acting in defence of his honour. His military superiors—the only ones on whom he really depends—will certainly be of his opinion. We shall be told once more that the honour of our army is so great a thing that no sacrifice is too great for it—not even that of a wretched human life here and there. For a few days the most courageous papers will talk indignantly of the matter, and then, when one of the numbers has been confiscated, they also will grow tame and hold their tongues, and things will go on just as they have gone on until now: that is to say, the unarmed portion of the nation will continue to stand at the mercy of the armed portion; that each one of us, by merely walking out in the street with no more than a stick to defend ourselves with, runs the risk of being murdered in open daylight by an officer we may chance to meet, and who may chance not to like the way we look at him, or choose to feel insulted because we brush against his sleeve. Are not these incidents becoming daily more common? Has not every garrison town got its sword affair nowadays? Does not armed brutality stalk our streets, and vulgar violence reign where culture is supposed to be daily advancing? Their arrogance grows instead of decreasing, and will go on growing——"

"Until the end comes," completed one of the men who had not spoken yet.

Several pairs of eyes turned towards him, Hort's amongst others. He was not a German, as his broken accent, as well as his face, at once betrayed; a face that looked almost black beside the many fair ones around him; beetle-browed, and with that aggressive development of jaw which recalls so unpleasantly the animal element in human nature. Beyond the generally accepted theory that Giacomo Alesta was a deserter from the Italian army and therefore cut off from his own country for ever, his comrades knew little about him. He himself never spoke of the reasons which had induced him to emigrate, but was given to drop hints regarding a "cause," whose exact nature, if he revealed it at all, he revealed only to a few kindred souls. From the first Hort had recognised in him one of his most eager, though evidently critical, listeners, but if he took the attentive Italian for nothing beyond a listener he was much mistaken. On many an evening, work being closed, while the men were gathering up their tools and he himself was making his way to his lodging in the village hard by, he might have seen Giacomo Alesta taking up the *rôle* which he himself had played in the midday hour, haranguing his comrades with flashing eyes, and with glib tongue improving upon his own theme so liberally, that, had he been a listener, he might scarcely have recognised it as his own. Even without knowing this he had found in this man a moral support, and was only a little astonished at not feeling more sympathy with this tacitly constituted adjutant. Perhaps it was that so brutally aggressive jaw which jarred upon his finer sensibilities, as it seemed to jar even upon those of his fellow-workers, who, although they liked to listen to his words, did not like the man himself, and perhaps would not have listened to him at all if it had not been that so many things he said coincided so well with what they had heard earlier in the day from the lips of their universal favourite, the engineer.

"But what sort of end can come?" asked one of them now, in answer to Alesta's remark. "We've got to have an army, I suppose?"

"Have we?" sneered Alesta. "The army is there only to protect capitalists; when once there are no more capitalists then there need be no army."

"That time will come, but we shall not see it," said Hort, for even to him Alesta seemed to be going a little fast.

"But we can work towards it, can we not?"

"How?" asked a few enquiring spirits.

"To begin with, by not submitting to the outrages which our armed compatriots put upon us," explained Hort. "The more sword affairs get into the papers the better. It is not possible that in the end public indignation should not be roused to a point which will make it impossible to the government to remain passive in this question. Have we not got our self-respect as well as they? And who can forbid us to protect it?"

"But not with walking-sticks," commented Alesta.

"With what then?"

"With revolvers."

Hort moved uneasily. Revolvers were things which did not belong to his private programme; the mere mention of them savoured too much of that physical violence which on principle, as well as from some paradoxical fastidiousness in his nature, he rejected. Yet to proclaim this in this moment would, to these naïve minds, look like unsaying all that he had just said. It seemed easier to let the remark pass.

"The more we concede to the army, the more it will demand. Does it not already take away the two best years of our youth, and the health of thousands every year?"

"And not only the two best years," said a burly, yellow-bearded man, angrily sticking his clasp-knife into a chunk of cheese. "Will I not have to throw up my work, and leave my wife and the five bairns to shift for themselves for a whole month this autumn, since I'm called in for the manœuvres?"

"And I too—and I too!" came in several rueful voices.

"Does not a separate law seem to exist for *them* and for *us?* Why, even the women bow before it, do they not? Do you not all tremble for your sweethearts' constancy when the soldiers are quartered in the village?"

He laughed again, that same jarring laugh, as he looked round the circle with shining eyes.

"I should like to see one of them come near my Mariedl!" suddenly exclaimed the apple-cheeked youth, bringing down his fist with such vehemence that a pot of beer, toppling over, sent a brown stream over the grass, which caused the meeting to adjourn in a burst of laughter. After all, despite the unsatisfactoriness of life in general, there were lighter sides to it as well.

It was Saturday, and therefore a day of early break-up for Hort, who, although lodging over-week in the village, preferred to spend Sunday in Mannstadt, whose bustle was more congenial to his unquiet spirit than the dull peacefulness of the rural Sabbath.

"Good night, boys!" was his parting greeting to the men who were in reality as much his disciples as his subordinates. "Any message to Mariedl?" he added with a passing smile, as his eye fell on the youth who had upset the beer-jug. "I'm bound for town, you know."

The young man grinned beatifically.

"I too am bound for town, master: I'll take her out to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.

MILLAR, meeting Hort next day in the street, found him still full of the "sword affair."

"It sounds almost incredible," he said, having listened to the engineer's excited version of the incident. "I wonder how I came to overlook it. And the man is actually dying, you say?"

"Very likely dead by this time, and the other will continue to walk proudly about the streets—more proudly than hitherto. Is that the sort of justice which you wish to introduce into your country?"

"I must hear more about this," said Millar, and straightway went and hunted up all the papers he could lay hold of. The "sword affair" figured in most of them, and bore, even in the most cautiously worded paragraphs, a decidedly ugly look.

"There is something here which escapes me," was Millar's conclusion. "I fancy I had better suspend judgment until I hear another version—General Russel's for preference."

Although he did not subscribe to all his countryman's theories, it was to him that he invariably took his difficulties.

On Sunday afternoons the general was usually to be found at Colonel von Grunewalde's whist-table; accordingly Millar early presented himself at the house of which, within the last few months, he had become an *habitué.* Bare though the reception-room of the colonel's was, its atmosphere suited him admirably; within its unadorned but hospitable walls he was sure of always meeting military men, from whose lips he drank in that simple, unhesitating soldier's creed, of which he had once been so firmly convinced, of which he still wanted to be convinced, despite certain doubts already moving within him. It was from their talk that he drew the arguments he required for opposing to General Russel's teaching.

And then there was Hedwig, quite as convinced, quite as enthusiastic a soldier at heart as any of her father's guests, and evidently very ready to discuss either this or any other subject with the good-looking and agreeable Englishman.

Millar, marking this rather over-accentuated friendliness of attitude, would probably have put her down as an ordinary society flirt, had not the observations made on the day of his initial visit—strengthened as they were by subsequent ones—led him to the conclusion that she was acting, not on impulse, but methodically—that, in fact, if he was being pushed forward now, it was principally as a means of masking another's defection. Many things had led him to suppose that, though Thekla had been fickle, it was not at her door alone that the charge of fickleness lay—nor that Hort was the only victim over whose heart the happiness of a certain resplendent couple would take its triumphant way. He could not easily forget the accent with which, answering some remark of her father's touching Lieutenant Pletze's non-appearance at the Sunday gatherings, Hedwig had said:—

"He was speaking of congenial elements the other day, was he not? Probably he has found what he was looking for."

The tone was almost cruelly scornful, but Millar saw the deep lines gathering upon her white forehead, and understood that the pain in her heart was no less cruel than the words.

If in spite of this she favoured him, it could be only in order to brave out her own desertion—another humiliating conclusion, in truth, but not necessarily a final one, as it occasionally occurred to Millar when meeting Hedwig's bright eyes approvingly fixed upon him. True, he wore no uniform, a circumstance which at first sight would appear to disqualify him hopelessly in her eyes, since early in their acquaintance Hedwig herself had startled him by speaking of herself quite calmly as the future wife of an officer—not of any particular officer, but, by a passing remark, taking for granted that this was the path of life marked out for her. This so obvious taking for granted provoked Millar to the experiment of saying:—

"Is it not rather risky to settle your future quite so categorically as that? *L'homme propose et Dieu dispose,* you know, and sometimes it is *la femme qui propose et l'homme qui dispose,* even if the particular man happens not to wear a uniform."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Hedwig, looking at him with a puzzled frown. It was evident that the idea of marrying a civilian had never seriously presented itself to her mind.

"You don't seem to me the sort of person, somehow, who could prize a man's clothes above the man himself."

"Not his clothes, but his profession, of which the clothes are but the outward mark."

"But might not a man be a soldier at heart, and yet be prevented by circumstances from adopting a soldier's profession?"

Millar, as he put the question, allowed a rather equivocal smile to play about his lips. That latent sense of excitement which is so apt to insinuate itself into the most harmless *tête-à-tête* between a young woman and a young man was egging him on.

That same latent excitement seemed to have touched Hedwig too, for she laughed, falling readily into his tone.

"Of course he might! Are you not yourself an example of this truth?"

It was moments like this which had made Millar think that his zeal in the great cause might possibly redeem even his profession in her eyes. The possibility did not displease him. Of course, she was not half so beautiful as Thekla Elsner, the only other young woman with whom at this time he came in contact; but she was to him a quite as novel, and certainly more amusing, though distinctly provoking type. What provoked him about her was exactly that one-sided enthusiasm which had begun by delighting him. She was not stupid, that was clear, and yet did not seem quite capable of realising that, beside what was to her the one great interest, there existed other interests as great, and greater in their importance to the world; that outside the only sort of life she had ever known there were countless other sorts of lives, which, though they might appear to her as distant as other planets do to us, might yet be larger worlds, more densely peopled than her own. This unconscious narrow-mindedness irritated Millar all the more that he guessed her nature itself not to be narrow, but to have been pressed into its present limits by habit and early training. Without being either ridiculous or offensive, this graceful, bright-eyed girl bore upon her person the unmistakable hall-mark of militarism.

Whenever Millar tried to enlarge her horizon it usually ended in a friendly dispute, as, for instance, on this Sunday afternoon, when, finding General Russel installed at the whist-table and consequently unavailable for the moment, he resigned himself not unwillingly to Hedwig's society.

"But yes," she gaily objected to his strictures, "of course I know that Science is a very great thing, and Art too—I learnt all about them at school; but where would Science and Art be, where would all the acquirements of civilisation be, without the soldier's sword to protect them? Tell me that, if you can!"

"Oh, I am not attacking the soldier's sword—you know I am not; I am very well aware that we have somehow managed so to arrange the world that we can only live at peace at the price of always preparing for war; all I maintain is that the arts of peace are more important to human happiness than the arts of war."

"I do not deny; but every one, surely, has the right to select his favourite branches both of Art and of Science. Well, and if I prefer battle pictures to every other sort of picture, and if I find that the science of strategy is the most engrossing of all sciences, what can you possibly have to object to that, I wonder?"

"At that rate I suppose that drums and fifes are sweeter music to you than the voice of the best opera singer?"

"Why only drums and fifes? Have we got no regimental bands? Have you not heard them play? Oh, if you had you would not be asking that question—you would yourself have thrilled down to the bottom of your soul, in answer to those strains, to that brave voice which makes one want to cry out to be led to battle."

Her cheeks and her eyes had grown brilliant as she spoke.

"You should have studied music," said Millar; "you have evidently got the inclination."

"Perhaps I have; but a piano would be far too bulky an addition to our luggage; that is why I never learnt. I don't know what poor papa would have done if I had proffered the request,"—she was laughing again—"perhaps he would have granted me a zither, but that is too weak-minded an instrument for my taste. That's another reason, I think, why I am not quite respectful enough to Science; I have no books to help me to keep up with it—books take such a place in packing, you see—and I've forgotten most of what I learnt at school."

"And since you left school? I have sometimes wondered what you fill up your days with. No music, no books, you tell me—and no flowers either," he added, casting a perplexed look about him. "None of those things among which I hitherto imagined that young ladies spent their days. Nor have I ever seen you with even a strip of embroidery in your hand."

"What would you have me embroider? Cushions which papa would most certainly leave behind him the next time we were moved?"

"Perhaps you don't like embroidering?"

"I can't honestly pretend that I do."

"Nor flowers?"

"Oh, well, flowers—that's another thing! But flowers are still more impossible to drag about the world than cushions,—I see that myself. I once bought myself a rose-bush in a pot, and it flowered beautifully for one summer; but before the next summer, just as the buds were forming, we changed stations, and though I smuggled it in between the saddles it got smashed up on the way, and so my roses never flowered again."

She smiled at him again, a little wistfully this time, it seemed to Millar. After all, she could not be so very different from other girls, since even this rose-bush had struck roots in her heart. For a moment Millar seemed to catch sight of the strangeness of this girl-life, spent at the side of the gallant martinet who was her father, with his comrades for almost daily intercourse, with no other woman very near her, and with not even the usual opportunities of creating for herself separate circles of interest. Was it a wonder if she threw herself somewhat impetuously into those open to her?

"But what have you got, then?" he asked, with an interest that was not unlike pity. "Your father, of course, has got his service to fill up his life—but yours? Is it not a little empty at times? As empty—well, as this room"—and he looked again around him.

"Empty!" In an instant she had rallied to the defence of her father, whom she felt to be thus indirectly attacked. "My life is as full as his, since all his interests are mine. What have I got? Why, I have got everything that he has got—that we all have got, we daughters and wives of soldiers. You think us a dull lot, perhaps? Not a bit of it! There is always something interesting happening in the army; no day passes without some piece of news about a change of garrison, or a promotion, or some new military experiment. Our own troop, the cavalry, are like a big family, and the regiment again is a family within a family; what touches one of us touches us all. And then, do you know, I always read our excellent army organ, and so I know all about everything." (Millar had often wondered to see her so well informed on the movements of even distant regiments.) "And then, but I tell you this in confidence"—and she bent forward a little, her mischievously sparkling eyes upon Millar's face—"I even help a tiny little bit to command the regiment. Papa often talks to me about the various petitions and the various requests he gets—such funny ones sometimes!—and occasionally he consults me. Sometimes it is the mother of a lieutenant, just entered, who writes imploring letters, begging him to keep an eye upon her beloved boy, and not to let him gamble or drink too much—they all seem to think that a colonel is a sort of nursery-maid—and sometimes it is a young woman who humbly begs to be allowed to marry the trumpeter, her *fiancé* of seven years' standing, and who promises to make him such a good wife! I amuse myself wonderfully well over these letters sometimes; you would never believe what good times papa and I have together. But these are only the ordinary times; there are much more exciting moments than these; for instance, in summer, when the exercises begin, and I ride out on my beloved Asra to watch papa commanding the regiment. Oh, those are glorious days indeed!—to see all those horses wheeling and all those swords flashing at his word of command! And what grand gallops I have on the way home! And when autumn comes and the big manœuvres—ah, by the bye, do you know that the manœuvres this year are going to be the biggest that have been for long? I am looking forward to September far more than I ever looked forward to any ball. And you are in luck too, for the field of operations is quite easy to reach from Mannstadt. You will be present, I suppose? You could not miss so grand an opportunity of getting a real idea of our army."

"I shall certainly be present. I assure you that I too am looking forward to September. Why, even at the manufactory we are preparing for the manœuvres: we turned out fifty prime bicycles for the War Office last week."

"It will be worth your while. Just fancy, a hundred and ten thousand men, all collected within a radius of twenty miles; eighty-five thousand infantry, twenty-one thousand cavalry, four hundred and twenty-five pieces of artillery, all the great personages of the army, and of course the Kaiser, too. It seems almost to have been arranged especially for your benefit, does it not?"

"Almost," said Millar, as he watched the warm colour ebbing and flowing upon her eager face. Meanwhile he was saying to himself: "Anyway, she's loyal to her father. In fact, I can't well imagine her being disloyal to any man."

He was about to ask some further question about the manœuvres when a move at the whist-table gave him the opportunity he had been waiting for. Abandoning Hedwig somewhat unceremoniously, he drew General Russel apart into that same window embrasure in which they had had their first talk of all.

"And this sort of thing does not even appear to be very uncommon," he concluded his indignant statement. "That is what they tell me, at least; but I cannot believe their wild talk. I need your word to assure me that these acts of brutality actually repeat themselves, and go unpunished. An unarmed man cut down in the open street, and unavenged!—but that would be nothing short of vandalism."

"No, it is only militarism," said the General, who had listened without any marks of agitation, the usual quiet smile upon his lips, as he diligently polished his eye-glass against his sleeve.

"You are always throwing that word at my head! How can you make militarism responsible for the act of a madman?"

"He would have been madder far if he had kept his sword in its scabbard."

"In Heaven's name, why? Are you defending his action?"

"I deplore it, as the inevitable often has to be deplored."

"Inevitable?"

"Yes. It is not that unfortunate lieutenant who bears the responsibility of his own act, but the system of which he is but an atom, and yet an integral atom. What they have told you is quite true: such collisions occur frequently, with more or less bloody results; but, for all that, there is far less personal brutality in play than would at first sight appear. Do you remember what I told you about that enforced spotlessness of life which is demanded of our officers, and which is in a certain sense the price of the high place accorded them in public esteem? But this is not all that is demanded of them; for it is not enough that they be honourable and honest, even the appearance of a slur upon their name must be scrupulously avoided, if they are to retain their places. Neither an insulting word, nor the lightest blow—not even the threat of one—can be allowed to sit upon the uniform. Therefore, he who has not been clever enough or prudent enough, or perhaps merely lucky enough, to keep his soldier's coat perfectly clean has no alternative but to take it off. It follows that the German officer has to walk through life, virtually, with his hand on his sword-hilt, always on the alert, always ready to draw it at the given moment. That lieutenant who to your eyes appears a sort of licensed highwayman was only making a desperate attempt to save himself—not his bodily life, which was in no danger from the shopkeeper's stick, but his future, his career, perhaps even his daily bread, if he happened to have no private fortune. If his insulter had been of his own rank a challenge, of course, could have settled the matter; but since one cannot fight a duel with a shopkeeper, and since a blow not instantly avenged, an insult not rammed down the throat of the speaker, becomes at once fatal to himself, what other resource has he but his sword? Has he not hundreds of warning examples before his eyes? Our provinces are full of these wrecked existences, men whose personal honour is intact, yet whom the inexorable army laws have cast out of its ranks; the lists of emigrants are fuller still of their names, since many prefer banishment to living out their disgrace at home. I myself could name to you men who once shone as cavalry officers, now gaining their bread in New York as riding-masters, sometimes even as grooms. It sounds a little merciless, perhaps, but once admit the actual position of the army, and everything else follows as unavoidably as day follows upon night. I even maintain that the arrangement has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. The net of moral qualifications through which our officers have to pass is a deucedly fine-meshed one, the crucible in which he is tested is a confoundedly hot one, but at least it makes the admission of unworthy elements almost an impossibility. To most countries these fine meshes are invaluable. You must remember that Continental public life is not so clean as English—it is good to have at least one class of which the nation can feel absolutely sure. But the system, like every system, demands its victims; that dying shopkeeper is one of them, a certain groom at New York is another, and, honestly, I don't know which of the two I am sorriest for."

"I am sorriest for the shopkeeper," said Millar, stoutly.

"That sounds almost anti-military, does it not?" asked the General with a shade of slyness in his smile. "Can it be that your opinions——"

"No, no,—my opinions are still my opinions, only —I'm beginning to think that the matter isn't quite so simple as it seemed to me at first," unwillingly admitted Millar.

But the General wisely forebore to press his advantage.

"The matter looks very simple at a distance; yet so big a machine cannot well avoid having its wheels within wheels. To an outsider the anxiety with which the army watches over the good repute of its members may occasionally appear ridiculous. No young girl is so preoccupied about the spotlessness of her first ball-dress, no lover so jealously watchful of the doings of his mistress, as the German army of the fair name of each one of its officers. This care reaches such a point that even to hear that a lieutenant has sold a horse advantageously is enough to make his superiors watch him uneasily, instinctively suspicious of this unsoldier-like aptitude for business. And yet this is only one of the many wheels which help the big machine to move."

"It is not always the most complicated machines that move the easiest," mused Millar aloud.

"This one works smoothly enough here, though it may yearly grind a few lives to powder; the question is only—how would it work over there?"

"That is what I am beginning to wonder," said Millar, but this time not aloud.

CHAPTER XI.

HERR and Frau Elsner were beginning to grow uneasy.

It was five months and more now since Lieutenant Pletze had asked that waltz tour of Thekla, and yet nothing definite had happened. In view of the assiduity with which he visited the house, as well as the ingenuity he displayed in meeting the Elsner ladies elsewhere, in view especially of the unmistakable state of his feelings, it was difficult to doubt his intentions. Why, then, did he not speak?

"It cannot be that he is afraid of a refusal," said the simple-minded Frau Elsner to her husband. "Surely we have given him every encouragement we could."

"More encouragement perhaps than was wise," remarked Elsner, with artificial severity.

"Is it not possible that after all he shrinks from the connection? May it not seem to him a degradation to marry out of his own class? We have no *von* to our name, you see."

"But we have a little money in our pockets," modestly completed the manufacturer; "and I will pay Lieutenant Pletze the compliment of saying that I judge him reasonable enough to—ahem—give to this circumstance its due weight. Nor do I take him to be one of those overstrained characters who can see degradation in association with honest work."

"But what can he be waiting for, then? For Thekla to declare herself? I do believe the poor child will end by doing so if he holds back much longer. Anyone can read her feelings on her face. And she is actually growing quite thin; she never takes a second helping at dinner now."

Frau Elsner sighed profoundly and noisily. This evidently was to her by far the most significant detail; the quantity of food consumed was her invariable guide in measuring emotion.

"I positively don't know what to do with her. She spends half her day at the piano now, and always with that Frauenliebe und Leben. I am very fond of music, very, but really I have had enough of 'Er, der Herrlichste von Allen.' She never gets beyond that, somehow. It's very significant that she won't be persuaded to go on to the next song—the one after the betrothal, you know:—

"Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben,
Es hat ein Traum mich berückt:
Wie hätt Er denn unter Allen
Mich Arme erhöht und beglückt?"

I'm sure she'll sing that only after he has spoken; and if he never speaks at all she'll never sing it at all, but just grow thinner every day before my eyes, and fade away into her grave."

---

* I cannot think nor believe it,
A dream has turned my mind;
Among a thousand others,
How should he have chosen me?

And Frau Elsner began to search for her handkerchief among the folds of her cashmere gown.

Her husband was nervously tapping an ivory paper-cutter against the edge of the table.

"Tut, tut, Frida—you take this affair far too much to heart. I can't say I have noticed any falling away in Thekla's figure. I do not deny that her fancy may have been taken by this young man's very pleasing exterior, as well as by his attentions; but even if they should lead to no result, I trust that no daughter of mine would so far forget herself as to abandon herself unrestrainedly to her disappointment. The great thing is to preserve a certain measure in all situations of life, a principle which I hope I have successfully instilled into her mind. There is no reason why she should despair, even if this chance fails her; she will have plenty of other chances, and enough opportunities of choosing a husband who will perhaps be even worthier of her than this young officer who in his conceit—that is to say, in his somewhat too great self-appreciation—possibly thinks that he would be condescending too far by marrying our daughter."

He spoke with studied indifference, still playing with the paper-cutter, but even Frau Elsner's not very quick ear was able to detect the false note. The fact of the matter was that despite his earnest disclaimers, despite the care with which on principle he avoided the appearance of bending too low before the Army idol, Herr Elsner's peace of mind was quite as deeply involved in the issue of the lieutenant's courtship as was that of his more naïvely outspoken spouse. His attitude towards the military power had always had a suspicion of the sour grape in it, and in the instant that the grapes appeared to be coming within reach of his hand their acidity had, for him, turned to the most delicious sweetness. Although nothing would have induced him to admit it, he had fallen as prostrate before the uniform as had Thekla herself. Though rich, he did not happen to be one of those money fanatics who care only for the pairing off of gold sacks, and despite all his care to preserve in his wishes that "measure" to which he was so devoted, he could see nothing more desirable at the present moment than to secure this penniless but brilliant lieutenant for his daughter. He had toiled hard to amass his fortune, and this young man had never worked, in the sense in which he counted work; but notwithstanding this he could discover no more worthy employment of his money than to lay it at the feet of this son-in-law, whose personal prestige—the double burnished prestige of a cavalry uniform, besides which even an infantry tunic looks dull—would in an instant raise the family to another social level. Nothing could flatter his importance more than to see his hard-earned thousands accepted; it was the thought that they might possibly not be accepted which was at present disturbing his equanimity.

"I suppose that to him it does appear like a condescension," said Frau Elsner, with a humility which in so big and so richly dressed a woman had a mildly humourous effect. "But, after all, if he is really in love! And if you saw how he looks at her sometimes you could not doubt. To be sure, I have been told that officers, and especially cavalry officers, are dreadful flirts in general, that they think nothing of turning a girl's head and then leaving her in the lurch. Oh, Ferdinand, if that were to happen to Thekla! I couldn't survive it! Is there no way of preventing it? Could you not do something? How would it be if you were to ask his intentions next time he comes?"

For a moment husband and wife looked at each other in silence, as though astonished at the audacity of the suggestion. Then Herr Elsner hastily dropped the paper-cutter.

"I—I scarcely think that would do. Such direct interference is generally—ahem—ill-advised. It is even possible that the young man might be—frightened off by the step you suggest."

"That is true," despondently agreed his wife. "And besides, one never can be quite sure of what an officer may do. Supposing he were to feel himself insulted by your question—and they have all sorts of rules about insults, I am told—might he not challenge you to a duel? And you have never fought in your life! No, no, Ferdinand, that would never do! Promise me that you will not say a word, or I shall not be able to sleep to-night!"

"I promise it you," said Elsner, with an emphasis well calculated to secure that threatened night's rest.

"That is well," she said, unburdening herself of another voluminous sigh. To her honest bourgeois mind, officers as well as the laws which ruled their lives appeared to be such mysterious and even rather awful things, that nothing was quite impossible. With the latest "sword affair" still fresh in her memory, it seemed to Frau Elsner now almost as though some dangerous encounter had been averted.

"There is nothing for it, I suppose, but just to have patience; but ah, I do wish I knew what he was thinking of!"

But even if she had known what Lieutenant Pletze was thinking of, it is not likely that Frau Elsner would have felt much the wiser, seeing that there were moments when the young man himself would have been puzzled how to define his present state of mind. Those sentiments which appeared clear to the looker-on were equally clear to himself, nor could he easily figure to himself a future without Thekla by his side—that glorious, golden-haired Thekla, who had taken his heart by storm with that same magnificent suddenness that she had surrendered her own. He recognised the surrender, he knew that he had only to speak, he saw the questioning looks of the parents bent upon him—covertly or openly—and read them aright, yet the word did not come. A hundred times it had been on his lips, and a hundred times pushed back again, not by diffidence, not by nervousness—the usual hesitation of the lover could not possibly beset him here—but by a consideration from which he could not succeed in emancipating himself. The fear of condescending too much, imputed to him by Frau Elsner, was not at work, neither was it that he did not love Thekla enough, but only that he did not love her alone. In his profession she had a rival, and would always have a rival, even though she bore his name.

When he said to Millar in the ball-room that to be a soldier was the only thing worth being, Lieutenant Pletze had actually meant it, not merely as a figure of speech, but as a deep conviction of his soul, which was of an earnestness of mould not always to be found among the wearers of a cavalry uniform. For, although typical of his class, the fair-haired soldier was typical only of its very best portion.

His soldier-father had died of the after-effect of wounds received in the Franco-German war; his soldier-brother had fallen in a pistol-duel, in defence of his honour—a circumstance which, by the bye, was considered an almost greater feather in his cap than even his father's battle-field deeds; his only sister was married to one of the most distinguished soldiers in the army; the army's glories and its pains had been about him ever since he could remember anything. What wonder, therefore, that quite naturally and inevitably he had fallen into that deep military groove from which escape is so difficult? Though by nature far too amiable to be actively arrogant, this splendidly gallant and chivalrous young fellow instinctively looked down upon every civilian he met, with a sort of good-humoured condescension which its unconsciousness alone saved from being offensive. He did not want to wrong anyone, he had neither scorn nor unkindness in his composition, but he honestly believed himself to be the superior of those people, not because of any personal qualities—this sort of vanity is purely impersonal—but simply on the strength of his profession. He was no more stupid than Hedwig von Grunewalde was stupid, but he was exactly as narrow-minded as she was, and for the same reasons. Being a man, he had unavoidably studied more, but these studies themselves had only pushed him deeper into the groove. In the matter of mere technical knowledge so much is required of a German officer nowadays, that the time which remains to him for cultivating his mind in other directions is painfully limited. Cultured the modern German officer undoubtedly is, always polished, sometimes refined, but both his culture and his polish are of a special sort, and range unmistakably under the category of army fabrications.

Probably it was the identity of their views which had first attracted him to the daughter of his colonel. They met constantly, all their interests were in common, their horizon was the same, and, besides all this, there was no denying that Hedwig's eyes were very bright. Although he had never been violently in love with her, he did not doubt that he would marry her some day; to himself, as well as to his comrades—and evidently also to Colonel von Grunewalde—it had come to seem a foregone conclusion. He himself had believed that he loved Hedwig, until, meeting Thekla at the press ball, he abruptly discovered his mistake. His prejudice against civilians had never extended to the fair sex, and without any anxious searchings of heart as to his own motives, he had abandoned himself to the new fascination. It carried him away so swiftly that he soon lost his footing; it was in attempting to regain it that he found it was too late.

That he should even wish to regain it appeared inexplicable to most of the lookers-on, among whom were the bulk of his comrades. What better fate could any of them wish than to be carried away by such a current as this? Was not the girl beautiful, and was she not rich? Why hesitate before plucking such a prize? Could it be any lingering remorse touching his colonel's daughter which was laming his hand? They had always known that he was a little different from themselves.

Yet they did not know how different he was. Even to himself Pletze was a little shy of acknowledging the scruple which beset him. Money marriages were so much the order of the day in the army, cavalry officers were so commonly accustomed to pay their debts out of the strong coffers of their millionaire fathers-in-law, that to acknowledge his own personal dislike of the arrangement would only have been to court ridicule. That he could attain what so many others attained he did not doubt, and yet, though perfectly aware of the market value of his uniform, it appeared to him something too great, something too sacred to be bartered thus, in the eyes of the world, for money-bags.

Once, in a talk with Millar, to whom he appeared to have taken a fancy ever since their first conversation in the ball-room, he discovered something of his thought.

It was easier, somehow, to speak of this thing to an outsider than to one of his comrades, the majority of whom, as he was well aware, enthusiastic soldiers though they might be, did not share in his almost sentimental view of his profession, and were content to accept its advantages, without troubling themselves to the same degree as to its moral obligations.

It was Millar himself, who, as puzzled as the rest of the lookers-on, had put an indirect question. Having watched the courtship from the beginning, he had seen it develop in a perfectly normal way, much as he had foreseen that it would, but having now entered a stage of stagnation, a sort of moral deadlock which he had not foreseen, and could not explain to himself.

On this occasion the lieutenant had mentioned that he would be leaving Mannstadt in the middle of August, since at that time the brigade was to be concentrated for the exercises preliminary to the autumn manœuvres.

"That will be rather a wrench, will it not?" said Millar, watching him curiously.

"It will be a wrench."

Pletze passed his hand thoughtfully across his eyes.

"Sometimes I think that it would be good not to come back. A wrench may come to be a break, may it not?"

"It can be turned into a break, I suppose—where a break is desirable."

"And may it not be desirable, without being at all desired? Desirable, I mean, from a strictly honourable point of view."

"I would require to be shown where honour comes in; but, to say the truth——"

"Look here," said Pletze, interrupting Millar with unexpected directness, "I know what you mean, and I don't enjoy manœuvres—in this sense. You are wondering, are you not? why I have not already asked Fräulein Elsner's hand, and you cannot understand why I should not want to come back again to where she is. I do want,—very badly; and I suppose I shall come back, and I suppose I shall some day throw all my prejudices to the wind—I quite admit that they are but prejudices—and sacrifice my pride to my affection; but it will be a sacrifice, in spite of everything. You think me quite idiotically in love—and so I am, but for all that, the sacrifice is there."

"It is the money that bothers you, I see; but is it just to yourself, as well as fair to her, to let the money alone divide you? There is always a certain difficulty about marrying a rich wife, when the man himself has nothing to bring."

"Oh, but I have a great deal!" broke in the lieutenant, bristling on the instant. "Would I not be giving her my name, my position, all my future career? That is just it,"—and his tone grew confidentially lower; "the whole thing seems to me a little too much like an exchange, a sort of friendly barter transaction; she gives me her money, and I give her all that attaches to my military rank. That's what it will look like in the eyes of the world, anyway. If I was quite clear financially it wouldn't have that same ugly look, perhaps; but life in a cavalry regiment isn't particularly cheap, and I'm not very good at scraping pennies. It's just about all I can do to keep the Jews quiet. They were quite quiet for some months, because they took my betrothal to be imminent; bless you, they all of them know to a figure the number of bicycles which Herr Elsner yearly turns out of his manufactory, as well as the number of visits I have paid to his house since January, but now they are growing uneasy, and are egging me on. Do you know that one of my chief creditors offered to act as matrimonial agent and to go to Herr Elsner for me? They think they are pushing me on, but they are really holding me back. The thought of the delight with which they would greet the news disgusts me unutterably. If I thought that Herr Elsner would refuse to pay my debts I think I would speak to-morrow! but of course they will go straight to him, and of course he will pay. Very likely you think me a fool, but all this goes against my grain. It does not seem worthy of my profession, somehow. I know that even my comrades laugh at me; but then you see, our profession isn't perhaps quite the same thing to all of us. In those who have home life, it never can take quite the same place, I suppose. But I have never had anything else but it. My mother died at my birth, my father a few years later; and I was so much younger than both my brother and my sister that they were out in the world long before I left school. I never felt as though I belonged to anyone or anything until I got into my regiment, and nothing really ever belonged to me until the day on which I put on my sword. That is why my profession has taken the place of everything else to me—why it has been to me family and home all together, and why it seems to me something so high, and that demands to be held high. I don't know if I can make you quite understand."

"I have understood already," said Millar, looking with undisguised sympathy at the earnest young face before him, which it wanted but the glow of emotion so wonderfully to transform. "I see your difficulty and I appreciate it, but all the same——"

"All the same, what?"

"All the same I trust that the wrench will not become a break."

"He's as hard-headed as a mule," was the inner comment which accompanied the words; "but I don't see how it can end in any way but one; it wants but the most trivial chance to push them into each other's arms."

CHAPTER XII.

When he turned his back upon the factory, Hort had believed, and even hoped, that he would never again set eyes upon Thekla Elsner, or, at the very least, never again find himself in the same room with her; but it was otherwise decreed. A very ordinary occurrence played him an unlooked-for trick.

There was a difficulty with the new machinery in the manufactory—nothing but one of those hitches to which all machinery is liable, and which so very much resemble the caprices of a spoilt child. Probably any intelligent mechanic would have sufficed for the occasion, but Herr Elsner, in whom the memory of recently paid bills was still painfully fresh, and trembling for his new cog-wheels and capstans, insisted that the man who had set them up was the only one who could be certain to put them right again. Accordingly, Hort was sent for, and followed the summons on the instant, as he always followed any summons calling him to one among those few things which he chose to recognise as duties.

It was the morning's post which brought him Elsner's letter; and having installed Giacomo Alesta as temporary head of the gang, he took leave of his workmen for the day.

"But I shall be back before the evening," he said at parting; "so those among you who are working their last day need not be afraid of having to start for their stations without their wages in their pockets."

It was an inconvenient day for leaving his work, but Elsner's letter had been couched in pressing terms.

"The last lot of bicycles for the War Office still want their fittings," he wrote in evident agitation. "I am bound to deliver them by September 1st; it would be an immense loss to me if I were obliged to go back on my contract; therefore come, I beg of you, as fast as you can!"

In answer to this cry of distress, Hort, after a hurried journey, presented himself at the manufactory about the midday hour, to be told that Herr Elsner had five minutes previously gone home to dinner, leaving Millar in charge.

When, half-an-hour later, the capricious cog-wheel—recognising its master, no doubt—had come to its senses Hort pulled out his watch.

"I suppose there is no especial need for my waiting for Elsner. By starting at once I could catch the two o'clock train."

"There may be no need, but I know that Herr Elsner counts upon seeing you. He has all sorts of questions weighing upon his mind."

"But he never comes to the manufactory before three."

"Rarely; but might you not look in upon him? It would not take you half-an-hour, and there is no fear of meeting anyone whom you would rather avoid," he added quickly, thinking he saw a contraction of Hort's eyebrows. "Mannstadt is about empty of troops just now, you know."

"I know."

Having stood for a moment staring silently at the floor, Hort looked up suddenly into Millar's face.

"Are they betrothed?" he asked, with a jerk of the underlip that was almost a grimace.

"Not publicly, at any rate, though I cannot of course say what private arrangements they may have come to."

Hort smiled scornfully.

"You don't want me to believe, do you, that he would have gone off for five weeks without making sure of his prize? Considering the meagreness of a lieutenant's pay that would be a trifle too unpractical."

"I'm not sure that he isn't an altogether unpractical person—that is to say, if you are referring to the gilding of the prize."

"I don't understand you," said Hort, with unwilling curiosity.

"You admit, do you not, that to a certain sort of man the gilding may be the one disagreeable feature of the case, especially when it is laid on so thickly as here?"

"And you imagine that he is that sort of man?"

"I have various reasons for supposing so."

"I'm not of your opinion," said Hort, still in that same supremely scornful tone through which, nevertheless, there pierced a little astonishment, not entirely unmixed with respect. "That is not the spirit in which our young heroes of the army are accustomed to do their wooing."

"I know nothing of the others; I am speaking only of this one."

"I suppose I had better go to Elsner's," said Hort, abruptly breaking off the talk.

The Elsner family were still at table as the servant informed Hort, who, having sent in his name, had asked to be shown to the business room.

"The engineer? Herr Hort?"

At the news Herr Elsner looked up in a flurry from his veal cutlet. "I shall be with him in a moment; ask him to wait."

"But, Ferdinand," interrupted his wife, honestly aghast, "you surely are not going to leave your dinner before the second course! And probably Herr Hort has not had his dinner yet, either—where is your sense of hospitality? Why not ask him to join us? You can talk quite comfortably while you eat."

"That is true." Elsner cast a glance in Thekla's direction, and visibly hesitated. The struggle was brief, and ended by his saying in his accustomed measured tone:—

"Tell Herr Hort that I request him to take a place at our table."

After all, what was there to fear of this man, whom recent events had shown to be harmless; for whatever doubts Herr Elsner might entertain regarding the lieutenant's intentions, he could not reasonably have any about Thekla's state of mind.

"That is well!" said Frau Elsner, with obvious pleasure. Nothing disturbed her kindly soul so profoundly as the thought of anyone going without his dinner—since, to judge from her personal sensations, this must be the very height of life's desolation. Besides, she had always felt a sort of wondering interest in Hort, whose conversation—fragments of which she had gleaned while he talked to Thekla—had both perplexed and touched her. Merely to hear speak of so many people in the world with too little to eat was enough cruelly to harrow her susceptible soul, as well as to enlist her sympathy on the side of the speaker who was so obviously their advocate. So much a victim was the big, fair-haired woman of her sympathies, that there had actually been a time when she had been quite prepared to favour Hort's suit; and though that seemed very long ago now, that was no reason why the poor young man should go without his dinner.

Hort, on receiving the message, did not immediately either accept or refuse. Although nothing upon his face especially attracted the servant's attention, his heart was beating furiously during the half minute that passed before he took his decision. He knew that if he said Yes, he would see Thekla within the next two minutes—would see her close—and the prospect appeared to him to be both insupportable and delicious; if he said No, he might possibly never see her again. Nothing but his own will stood between him and the acceptance of the invitation, since he knew that even by taking a later train he could still be at his post before the evening.

"I will come," he said after that pause.

Yearning and curiosity—a curiosity which his short conversation with Millar had wonderfully quickened—had gained the battle.

In the dining-room he was received by anxious enquiries from Herr Elsner, wreathed smiles from his hostess, and by an embarrassed greeting from Thekla who, from the moment that Hort's presence in the house had been known, had begun to crumble her bread between her fingers with an air of quite unusual annoyance upon her generally so calm face.

"In order, you say? Actually in order?" enquired Elsner with joyful incredulity.

"In full action when I left the manufactory."

"Splendid! Splendid! You have worked a real miracle! Johann, bring back the soup for Herr Hort. Let me give you a glass of wine, meanwhile." And, beaming with satisfaction, Herr Elsner poured it out with his own hand.

"Then there will be no difficulty about the delivery to the War Office? I had another urgent reminder this morning."

"Not the slightest. So far as the machinery is concerned the War Office can have its bicycles in a week."

"Splendid! And it isn't the War Office alone. I have never had so many orders as this season. I have been told that quite a number of people are learning to ride the bicycle expressly for the purpose of being able more easily to follow the troops."

"Will we see any of our own bicycles, I wonder?" asked Frau Elsner, mixing smilingly in the conversation—"I mean those scouts upon wheels that you told me about?"

"There is no reason why we should not, although it is very likely that we shall not see the half of what we expect to. I fancy it will be a mere chance whether we get a sight of the tail of an army."

Herr Elsner was in such good humour that there were symptoms of his growing jocular.

"You are thinking of assisting?" asked Hort, careful to look at Frau Elsner alone.

"Indeed we are. We have been looking forward to it for weeks—Thekla and I. They are the first big manœuvres that we shall ever have seen, and it's quite easy to reach from Mannstadt."

Hort said nothing at once, and wondered only that the next mouthful he swallowed did not choke him, so sharp was the spite rising within him. He knew, indeed, that many excursions to the field of operations were being prepared, seeing that the great military spectacle was more attractive to the general public than could be even a new operetta; but in his eyes the Elsners' resolution could bear but one meaning. Furtively, from under his lowered brows his eyes went towards Thekla, and the confusion on her face was as food to the anger within him. Until this moment he had not trusted himself to look at her, and now only he was able to perceive that the last few months had changed her, not to the disquieting degree on which her mother had insisted, but still unmistakably changed, with a new shade on her serenity and a new trouble in her eyes. The recognition could bring him no relief, knowing, as he did, that the trouble was for another.

"I am rather of Herr Elsner's opinion," he said, forcing a smile to his pale lips; "namely, that there is every chance of your getting nothing to see for your pains but clouds of dust, and perhaps a few grimy patrols. A manœuvre isn't a parade, and the bigger it is the more difficult to get anything like a comprehensive view."

"Just so; and I myself do not start with any exaggerated expectations. Also I doubt whether the accommodation at Reising, where we mean to put up for the great week, will be of the best. But since it is the desire of my wife and daughter—that is to say, since it seems the natural thing to do, and might even argue a want of patriotism to lag behind so many others, I have decided to make the effort."

It had suddenly occurred to Herr Elsner that the construction which Hort could put upon the excursion might possibly be the right one; hence the hurried correction.

Dinner was over, and black coffee being drunk in the drawing-room, when Hort unexpectedly found an opportunity for airing some of the wrathful soreness within him. During the whole of the meal he had avoided directly addressing Thekla; he had meant to leave without doing so, but circumstances proved too strong for his resolve.

Herr Elsner had retired in order to change his coat previous to returning to the manufactory, and Frau Elsner, who as a true German was her own housekeeper, had replied to some urgent domestic call. Almost to his consternation, Hort awoke to the fact that he and Thekla were alone in the room. That she was quite as much disturbed by the discovery as himself was evident from the rapid flushes that passed over her face, and by the alarm in her eyes that strayed almost panic-stricken towards the door, as though with thoughts of escape. For one instant he was not far from feeling pity, but within the space of the drawing of a breath the impulse was passed, changed to a bitter pleasure at her distress. A cruel mood had hold of him, as, deliberately turning from the book he had been fingering, he approached the low chair on which she sat.

"Is a question allowed?" he enquired, apparently with the most cold-blooded self-possession, though his heart was again beating with suffocating haste. Then, as Thekla, not quite steadily, had said, "Of course!" —he bent a little over her, so as to be able to lower his voice:—

"Are congratulations premature?"

It was not alone the irresistible temptation to torture the woman for whom he had undergone such tortures, which was drawing him on. Besides furious spite, furious curiosity was at work within him. The absence of a public announcement could not suffice him; he wanted to discover now, immediately, whether that private understanding which Millar had spoken of as possible existed or not.

And now, surely, he might have felt pity. From her position on the low chair Thekla was looking up at him, trembling and flushed, with deprecating blue eyes which seemed to be asking for mercy, which wanted to sink, yet were held by his. Yet what he felt was not pity, rather a rapturous astonishment at discovering over again how beautiful, how perfectly flawless her face was even seen thus at close quarters —he had forgotten how deep were the eyes, how clear the skin—and at the same time a perfect rage of despair at the thought that all this was not for him.

So strong was the tide of emotion that swept over him then that it was all he could do not to put out his hand towards the prize which he knew to belong to another, not to bend down a little lower yet, and, taking her unawares, press his lips for once, and once only, against that quivering, childish mouth.

"Congratulations?" she faltered.

"Yes, I can explain further, if you like, but I fancy it is superfluous. I am working outside Mannstadt now, but you see that its news reaches me, all the same."

"It does not reach you right, then. I—I—there is nothing to congratulate about. Nothing has been said; I mean——"

"Not yet? Wonderful, certainly, how blind some people are!"

Hort broke into his harshest laugh, just as Herr Elsner opened the door.

A little quiet unreasonable relief mixed for a moment with his wrathful thoughts. The private understanding did not exist, then—the last definite step was not taken—but what consolation could that bring him, seeing that the reluctance was not on the woman's side, but on the man's? She was won already—waiting only for his word—that much would have been abundantly clear to him even had he been no jealous lover. It was with this impression, as the last and strongest, that he left the Elsners' house.

"She does not even take the trouble to hide it," he told himself; "she is going after him now, openly, in the eyes of the world. On the mere chance of catching sight of him at the head of his company, she has induced her parents to live for a week in some wretched inn, where that poor Frau Elsner will probably die of hunger, for want of anything fit to eat. She can't live without her hero for a matter of six weeks, it seems!"

With such bitter jeers as these did he shorten his journey back to the spot where his gang of workmen were just beginning to collect their tools for the night. Many of them, army reservists, summoned for the impending manœuvres, were to receive their last pay for several weeks. With rueful faces they counted over the coins in their hand.

"That won't keep five children alive till I'm back again," grumbled the yellow-bearded paterfamilias, whose very beard—of which he was passing vain—would have, on the morrow, to be sacrificed to army regulations.

"I never said that it would," said Hort in a tone of exasperation, born of his experiences of the afternoon. "You don't expect surely that your brats can even fall into the balance when weighed against the needs of the army?"

"But I don't see why the army should have need of me in particular; aren't there lots of others?"

"Of course there are; but we've all got to take our turn you know—unless, of course, we happen to have friends enough to say a good word for us, or money enough to soften the hearts of the authorities. But you, my poor fellow, have got neither friends nor money, and that's why you must just hold your tongue, and put on your uniform, and stop talking nonsense about your children. Children, indeed!

Why, they don't even count until they are old enough to be recruited. Just now the people up there don't want to know anything about them, but wait till they are twenty, and their existence will be discovered fast enough—never fear!"

"It does seem hard," sighed the youngest of the gang—it was Mariedl's apple-cheeked admirer—whose existence, in the sense referred to, had not yet been discovered, but whose youthful heart was already torn at the prospect of the separation which next year must bring.

"And yet it's only what you deserve, what we all deserve, for submitting so tamely to the iron yoke."

"But what can we do, after all?"

"We can make the army—all armies—impossible," interposed Alesta, whose dusky face betrayed to-day a heightened interest in the subject in hand.

"We can do that?" came in several incredulous voices, but it was towards Hort that they looked for corroboration of the amazing statement.

"Who else? Are not *we* the army? Is not it with our flesh and blood that it fills up its ranks? We are the nation, and an army can subsist only by the will of the nation; and if the nation comes to declare that it will not submit any longer to having its flesh and blood put to so ignoble a use, how can the army go on existing?"

It was probably the most directly revolutionary thing which Hort had yet said, at least in public; but the beauty of Thekla's face—re-discovered, so to say—and the heat of the jealousy he had brought away with him from that sight, had for the moment maddened him too entirely to let him weigh his words.

"We are too few of us to declare anything," said one of the reservists, despondently.

"We are few now, but we shall be more some day. Let only every man act up to his convictions."

"And the manner of making the declaration?"

"There are all sorts of manners," said Alesta, with a curiously significant look out of his deepset, glowing eyes.

One of the coolest of the listeners shook his head.

"I don't know how it is with your army in Italy, but if you think it's an easy thing to arrange a revolt in the army here, then you're deucedly mistaken. They're far too sharp for that. You'd never get to even drawing your sword. Why, you've only got to look at an officer too hard in order to be clapped into arrest."

"With a deal board for your bed," completed Hort, grinding the heel of his boot into the grass.

"There are other ways than open revolt," remarked Alesta, nothing disconcerted.

"But probably they are all a little dangerous?"

The Italian threw up his hands with a theatrical gesture of contempt.

"Ah, well—if you want to be perfectly safe—if you are too much afraid of the policeman to lift a little finger, then just don't lift it, and be content to serve your two years, and to let your fields be trampled to pieces by the troops in autumn."

"Yes, the fields suffer terribly," agreed several of the listeners.

"All for the good of the country," said Hort, with his bitterest smile upon his lips, "or at least for its glory. What would other nations say of us if we did not give them a grand military show every year? And what would our young lieutenants say if they had not so good a chance of showing themselves to the public at the head of their troops, and galloping about busily before the eyes of the ladies—whether over your fields or not—that is a matter of indifference!"

"Oh, but to us it isn't indifferent; Franz Bentler was just telling me yesterday that at Goldstein they'll have to dig up all their potatoes unripe, because they couldn't count upon finding any after the troops had passed that way. They'll ask for compensation, of course, but every one knows what that means. And all the flour in the mill has been retained by order of the government for the troops, so that the people have got to go to Reising for their bread. And not a house in the place that has not got a handful of soldiers billeted upon it. No one seems pleased about it."

"Except the women," said Hort, with his sudden, sharp laugh; "you may be sure that the women are pleased. With so many uniforms about, your sisters and your wives will think themselves in paradise. But the price of that paradise comes out of your pockets, my friends—even if you have not to pay for it with your honour. If it were the potatoes alone! But how about every drop of beer you drink, and every pipe of tobacco you smoke? How about even the salt which you put in your soup, and without which even the poorest cannot live? What makes these things so hard to pay for? The taxes, of course! And what has swelled the taxes to their present monstrous size? The army budget. Without that we should be living in plenty and in quiet, and, please God, we shall be living so some day—or if not we, then our children, or our grandchildren; for it is not possible that the world should continue to bear this burden for much longer. Most men are cravens, yet even the cravens will one day rebel against feeding the armed monster that lives upon our very lives."

"Yes, it must be so!" the general murmur passed, while all eyes hung, fascinated, upon the pale-faced speaker, in whose voice there was to-day a thrill which they had not heard before, the darkness of whose eyes was lit by a flame which not one of them guessed to be an anguish of heart.

Dusk had fallen when he left them, but even then all of the men did not disperse.

An hour later anyone passing this way might have seen a shadowy group huddled together at the foot of the embankment, in their centre a shadowy figure, gesticulating fiercely, and talking rapidly, though not loud.

CHAPTER XIII.

“ARMY 2, coming from the direction of Griesberg, Rennthal, has crossed the river Pleser, and is marching upon Felden. Army 1 is to concentrate with the least possible delay and to throw back the enemy.”

“Army 1, whose bulk, coming from the west, is supported by strong bodies from the south, is collecting on the borders of the Most river. Army 2, having advanced over Griesberg and Rennthal, has the order to continue the offensive movement over Reising and Grassen, towards Mannstadt.”

Thus ran the wording of the “supposed situation,” comprising the orders for the two camps into which the huge body of troops had been divided. Millar had them by heart almost from the moment that, in the company of General Russel, he reached the field of operations. Even before reaching it he had spent several hours over maps, earning for himself more headaches than insight into coming events, and had learnt from the *Ordre de Bataille* that Army 1 consisted of two corps and one cavalry division, representing about 46,000 men, and owning 204 pieces of artillery, while Army 2 could boast of close upon 50,000 men and a superiority of some sixty odd pieces of artillery. As yet, however, although the fourth day of operations was reached, the presence of this mass of troops had scarcely made itself evident to the casual looker-on. Millar, in his impatience for the sight after which he had sighed for so long—the sight of an army—and his ignorance of the conditions of even mimic warfare, could not quite restrain a certain unreasonable sense of disappointment. The booming of cannon from almost all points of the horizon formed indeed a suggestive background; but close at hand there had as yet been little to see beyond tired-looking bodies of infantry tramping along the roads, sometimes a cavalry squadron bivouacking in the shade of a forest, here and there a patrol appearing on the crest of a hill, silhouetted for a moment against the sky, to dip again beyond the line of horizon; rows of provision waggons lumbering conscientiously along the left side of the roads they encumbered—all this there was to be seen, and plenty of inquisitive peasants, as well, staring along the roads, and no less inquisitive sightseers, on wheels and on horseback, darting somewhat fitfully about the country in the spasmodic attempt to come in somewhere or other at the right moment; sunburnt and perspiring faces, an insatiable demand for liquid in every shape, from the jugs of water which compassionate onlookers held out to the marching soldiers, to the Rhine wine provided by the enterprising trader who dogged the steps of higher officers more persistently than any patrol; and a great deal of dust over everything, but no total impression to be gained, so far, nothing like the big effect which Millar had hoped for.

"It is coming," said the General, unmoved, in answer to his questions.

"It is coming," said Hedwig von Grunewalde, with the happiest smile which Millar had yet seen upon her lips.

Mounted upon her favourite Asra, a light-grey habit moulded without wrinkle upon her youthful figure, her eyes full of the eagerness of present interests, Hedwig was looking her best. She was never seen to greater advantage than on horseback, where her want of height disappeared, and only the symmetry and alertness of her graceful person remained evident. Although for four days she had been in the saddle almost continuously, following the movements of her father's regiment, under the guidance of a trusted groom, there were no signs of fatigue upon the face which she now turned towards Millar.

"You really must not be impatient. You cannot want more than I do to see the final effect, but if you were a soldier you would know that the effect can have no value unless it has been correctly led up to. You must remember how far apart the different portions of each army were only the day before yesterday; all depends upon which of them can concentrate more quickly. Has not General Russel told you all that? The first day was the day of the patrols, the second was the day of the cavalry, for the infantry of the opposing forces was still too far apart to come into collision; it was yesterday only that their advanced troops got into touch with each other, but it will not be until to-morrow that the grand crash comes, when both sides have reached the open ground they require in order to be able to unfold."

"And in order to give the Kaiser the proper view of the final act," remarked General Russel, with a trifle of mockery in his smile.

The light trap in which he and Millar sat was drawn up at the cross-roads where the meeting with Hedwig had taken place.

She looked at him reproachfully.

"Why do you talk of the manœuvres as though they were a theatre?"

"That's what they are to almost every one except the actors."

"But not to a soldier, surely—and you are a soldier."

"Perhaps it is because I am a soldier that the final act seems to me the least important at all, the obligatory firework effect which is calculated principally to throw dust in the eyes of the looker-on."

"I have heard this mimic warfare laughed down as a useless game," began Millar.

"Then you have heard wrong; it is neither useless nor a game, and would not be a game, even if the necessary conditions of warfare were more entirely absent than they actually are. Nothing easier than to mock at mock battles; yet even in mock battles the element of surprise is not entirely wanting, since the most careful preparations will not prevent accidents happening, and since the weather will not be commanded in times of peace any more than in times of war. Where accidents happen decisions have to be taken, dispositions reversed, orders modified, and it is in these moments that the cool man, the man with presence of mind, becomes instantly distinct from the man without it. You object perhaps that the trial is not adequate, since no bloodshed is entailed by a blunder; but other things are—instantaneous collapse of a long and honourable career, for instance, since even thirty years of faithful service are not weighed—cannot be weighed—against an important mistake. Mercy is not a military virtue, you know; and where regard for individuals begins there the efficiency of the army ceases. A sad necessity, if you will, but an unmovable one. The knowledge that it is so, quite suffices to put a set of shaky nerves off their balance, believe me. If they did nothing more than unmask these shaky nerves the autumn manœuvres would be worth more than the money they cost. The man who, when told that the infantry division on whose support he counted has not been able to cover the distance stipulated, because of the heavy state of the roads, or that his artillery has stuck fast in a bog, does not lose his head is pretty safe to keep it on a field of battle. That's why I say that, despite the real fatigues undergone, despite the minute combinations necessary, it is false to call this a trial of endurance, or even of organisation; it is, first of all, a trial of presence of mind."

"And yet the endurance too has been proved," said Hedwig, bridling in defence of the army in general. "Did you not hear that the 52nd regiment covered sixty kilometres yesterday? Surely that is good practice for war? And other things, beyond endurance, have been proved as well. The pioneers, for instance, have accomplished wonders. Papa was just telling me about that bridge which between eleven o'clock last night and half-past five this morning was moved from Felden to Reising, a distance of six kilometres, if you please. And there was nothing mimic about that at any rate, since the whole division passed over in safety. You must acknowledge that that bridge, at least, was a very real thing."

"The whole affair is a very real thing to you, I fancy," said Millar, following the nervous movement of her fingers upon the reins.

"I should think it is! Do you know why poor Asra is so wet just now? We had very nearly fallen into an ambush of the enemy's infantry, and I have been galloping for my life, quite forgetting that the rifles are not loaded! In the process I somehow managed to lose Johann, too. I hope you are not laughing at me. This is quite the most exciting moment of my whole year, you know. Our troops are massing beautifully, and it seems that the enemy's right wing is too weak to act offensively; for the last two hours they have been throwing up trenches on the crest of the Pleser ridge; evidently they are putting themselves on the defensive for to-morrow, and we shall attack, instead of being attacked."

"Who brought the news about the entrenchments?" asked the General.

"The 3rd patrol, I think it was. The army commander has changed some of the dispositions for to-morrow in consequence."

"Hum; has no one got at the back of the line yet?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I think it would be interesting to know what exactly is happening behind those trenches.

Trenches are not generally dug in broad daylight unless you are prepared to brave observation. But the forenoon is getting on and the distance is tremendous; probably it is too late now for a patrol to get round and back again in time to bring any useful information."

Hedwig began to fidget in her saddle.

"You are making me nervous, General, although I don't quite understand you. I must find out if no further news has come in. What are those horsemen over there? White bands on their caps—that's the enemy, then; one of their patrols trying to get behind *our* lines, perhaps. I must try and follow their movements. Goodbye for the present; I suppose we shall meet on the battle-field to-morrow;" and with a sharp cut across the willing Asra's shoulder, she was off again at full gallop.

"Could measure herself even with an English woman, could she not?" remarked the General, approvingly.

"Yes, she would look particularly well in an English hunting-field," agreed Millar, gazing somewhat dreamily after Hedwig's diminishing figure.

When she drew rein at last she was out of sight of the occupants of the trap, and for the moment the horsemen with the white bands on their caps had disappeared from her view. It was a railway embankment, cutting straight across her path, which had caused her to check Asra rather brusquely. Presumably the enemy was on the other side of the obstacle, hidden from her by its height. Listening intently she thought she heard the sound of trotting hoofs, deadened by the body of earth beside her, and yet apparently approaching.

"From the top I should be able to see what horsemen these are," thought Hedwig, feverishly. "I wonder if the side is too steep for Asra? It's quite illegal, I suppose; but, after all, in time of war——"

She was already charging the bank as she thought it; a scramble, two tremendous pulls, and Asra stood triumphant upon the forbidden ground. Yes, there were the white-banded horsemen—four or five of them—close at hand now, having just emerged from the strip of pine-wood which came to within fifty paces of the railway line. But they were not drawing any nearer. As Hedwig emerged on to her point of vantage, she perceived that they stood drawn into a group, as though for consultation. Rising as high as she could in her stirrup, she next became aware that the officer who led them was talking to a man on foot. She could see him bend from the saddle and put something into the hand of the old, grey-haired peasant—a folded paper, pointing at the same time up the line of railway. Looking that way Hedwig could just catch a distant glimpse of the red-brick station house. By the time she looked back again the horsemen were on the move once more, in the opposite direction, while the peasant, holding the white paper in his hand, had turned his face towards the red-brick building. In an instant it was all as clear to Hedwig as though it had been a pantomime acted for her special benefit. The enemy's patrol had come, from the direction of the first army's head-quarters, and, while pursuing its investigations in another direction, was despatching to its own headquarters the information gathered, by means of a telegram which it had been imprudent enough to entrust to an outsider.

"It would be a good thing indeed, if I could prevent that paper reaching the station house," thought Hedwig, gazing after the peasant, who tramped stolidly towards his goal, the white paper conspicuous in his hand. "I could catch him up easily, of course, even if he takes to running—but after? I can't well come to a hand-to-hand scuffle with him. Johann might have done the job, if I had not so cleverly lost him. Surely he ought to be on my track by this time?" and rising again in her stirrup, she looked about her in search of the missing groom. But strain her eyes as she would he remained invisible. For a moment, indeed, that stolidly tramping peasant was the only moving figure within sight, for the enemy's patrol had again disappeared among the pine-trees.

"Shall I try it, after all?" Hedwig was just saying to herself, when again the sound of trotting horses fell upon her ear, and from another point of the road there emerged another band of horsemen, and without white bands on their caps, which meant that they were friends. There was the salvation looked for. Without wasting a single instant on reflection, Hedwig scrambled down the bank in as headlong a fashion as she had scrambled up it, and made straight for the band of riders, whose horses' heads, as she at once perceived, were turned away from the direction of that critical station house. So entirely had the situation taken possession of her that she was close to them before she perceived that they wore the uniform of her father's regiment. Another keener glance, and in the officer riding at their head she had recognised Lieutenant Pletze. For just one moment Asra was surprised by a sudden check on the reins, followed, however, by an enhanced dig of the small heel. In that moment Hedwig remembered, that although this man in the dusty blue tunic, and the hard, glittering helmet might possibly be a fickle lover, he was also an ally, almost a comrade. However far apart their interests might lie in general, at the present moment they were identical. Provoking, certainly, that she should have stumbled upon this patrol of all others, but that was no reason for betraying the cause of Army 1.

Hearing the gallop of her horse behind him, Pletze turned in the saddle, not very willingly, for in the moment that she stood conspicuous upon the embankment he had identified the amazon, and if the meeting was distasteful to her, for him it bore a certain flavour of guilty self-consciousness, peculiarly repellant to his nature.

"What is it?" he asked, as she came abreast, deeply humiliated by the discovery that he could not meet her gaze without reddening.

"Turn your horses the other way," said Hedwig, breathless. "There is a message to be interrupted. You have only just arrived in time. Look along there; you see that peasant in the long coat? He has a telegram in his hand; it was given him by an enemy's patrol—I saw it; he is taking it to the station; it will be despatched in five minutes."

"No it won't!" said Pletze, transformed in an instant. "Spurs to your horses, men! It will be an eternal disgrace to us if that fellow reaches the station!"

Hedwig, swept along by the sudden movement, found herself a little in the rear of the dragoons, the gallop of whose horses caused the stolid peasant first to look anxiously over his shoulder, and then to break into an uneven run. It was the end of his stolidity, obviously. Despite the strong reality which it all bore for her, Hedwig found herself laughing aloud at the sight of the panic-stricken countenance which the fugitive turned upon his pursuers, as well as at his ejaculations which, had his life been actually forfeited, could not have exhibited a more terror-stricken piety. It was with a groan of relief as profound as though he were thereby saving his skin that he handed over the closed paper.

"I must plaster up his fright with a few coins, since it is I he has to thank for this," said Hedwig, groping for her purse. "But it was a good thing you met me, after all, was it not?"

"An excellent thing!" radiantly acquiesced the lieutenant.

All trace of embarrassment had disappeared from both their manners, swept away by the excitement of the small incident. For the moment the common interest sufficed entirely to save the situation. He looked at her straight from under the rim of his steel and leather helmet, which, however inconvenient a head-covering on a warm September day, sufficed to bring him, in Hedwig's eyes, at least, within measurable distance of the crusaders—his restless steed fretting under his hand, his whole person producing that supremely satisfying impression which the security of perfect horsemanship never fails to convey.

"I shall send this to headquarters at once. Here, dragoon Berger, your horse is fresh; get to Grassen as fast as he will carry you! But that patrol?" and he turned again to Hedwig. "It cannot be far yet; at what point did it enter the forest?"

"Over there, where there is that break between those two big pines."

"How many men?"

"I counted five."

"Splendid! Then we can hope to make a mess of their plans. Corporal Schulz, you follow them with five men—but not the best horses, mind—I require those for myself, keeping out of their reach, of course, if you can, but worrying them off the line in the usual way. Really, Fräulein von Grunewalde, you deserve a decoration! Without you we should have missed both them and their telegram."

"A decoration would never reward me," said Hedwig, a little tremulously.

"My gratitude, then," said Pletze, too low to be heard by the men.

"I do not ask even for that."

The lieutenant seemed on the point of impulsively extending his hand, but restrained himself in time.

"Thank you, and goodbye. I much dislike leaving you thus alone, but I have not a moment to lose."

"You are going after the patrols?"

"No; Schulz will manage that; I have a harder piece of work before me—to turn the enemy's flank and find out the truth of the position in the rear."

"But somebody was just saying that it was too late to do that in time to act upon the information."

"It is almost too late, but almost is not quite, and I mean to do it if it is to be done. You wish me success, do you not?"

"With all my heart!" said Hedwig, her eyes lighting up beautifully in response to his.

In the next moment already the fire had died down, quenched by the tears which welled up, as she watched the flying hoofs of his horse.

"How can he be so splendid, being so faithless?" she was asking herself, too absorbed to notice that Johann, having at last succeeded in tracking his young mistress, had just emerged very red and breathless from a thicket of willow close by.

Colonel von Grunewalde had been particularly unlucky in his quarters for the last two days. Having passed one night in a barn, wrapped in his cloak, he was preparing to spend the second in a village schoolhouse, upon a wooden bench, with that same cloak in guise of mattress. It was the sort of couch which, in theory, appealed entirely to his soldierly instincts, and yet looked so little attractive in practice, that the colonel, casting about him for some means of lengthening the evening and consequently shortening the night, hit upon the idea of making a brief excursion to the neighbouring country-house, where Hedwig was staying with friends, in order to see how his little adjutant, as he loved to call her, was bearing the fatigues of the campaign. It was the first time since the beginning of the manœuvres that he found himself in her immediate neighbourhood—why not profit of the fortunate chance, since a ten minutes' ride would take him to her side? In half an hour he would be back at his post, and, the operations for the day being suspended, it was at least probable that his presence could be dispensed with for that space.

At Schloss Wallsee he was received with open arms, not only by Hedwig herself, but also by the sociable young couple to whom the manœuvres were welcome principally as an opportunity for exercising promiscuous hospitality.

Hedwig lost no time in drawing him off to the further end of the big drawing-room, where she forced him into an armchair so wide and luxurious that the colonel's spare figure was almost swallowed up between its broad arms.

"You look terribly tired, my poor *Väterchen;* I insist upon your sitting still for at least ten minutes!" and she promptly sat down on a stool at his feet, as though to prevent his premature escape.

For a few minutes they talked, almost *en tête-à-tête,* left discreetly alone by the rest of the numerous and gay company, Hedwig, whose light-coloured dress was stained to a delicate rose colour by the silken lampshade close by, sitting all the time in close proximity to the colonel's tall riding-boots. Though the boots were dusty, and the voice in which he gave her his account of the day's doings and his hopeful prognostications for the morrow was dry to the point of being occasionally cracked, they both seemed to her supremely lovable, as did also the bony hand which hung by his side, and which from time to time she lightly touched with the tips of her own fingers, as though to bring the reality of his presence more completely home. For he had been to her not only father and mother together, this tired old soldier in the deep armchair, he had been to her friend and comrade in arms as well.

“It’s a good thing, after all, that I shall probably never marry,” Hedwig mused as she listened. “I don’t quite see how he could do without his adjutant; I’m the only thing in his life that is not unmixed duty.”

Five minutes were barely passed when a commotion became apparent at the upper end of the room. A moment before the door had opened and a servant rapidly approached the master of the house. Hedwig got quickly to her feet, aware that all faces had turned suddenly in their direction.

“A message for the colonel!”

The words reached her amid the hum of voices.

Already the door had opened again, disclosing the figure of a dragoon, whose streaming face was evidence of the pace at which he had ridden. In a moment the room was in commotion. Saluting mutely, the man handed over the written message, which the colonel, having crossed the room in a few strides, read in silence, all eyes upon him. Hedwig, watching anxiously, saw the shadow of a smile spreading over his face as he pushed the paper into his pocket.

"Good news?" she asked, following him into the entrance after his hurried leave-taking.

"Important news, at any rate. Patrol 2 has succeeded in turning the enemy's flank, and has broken through the lines with a message to head-quarters which gives a completely new picture of the situation. In order to meet it two divisions will have to be moved before morning; they are on the march by this time, no doubt; our disposals also are changed—these are the new orders."

"Patrol 2? But that is one of the patrols of our regiment, is it not?"

"Yes, it is Pletze's. I knew what he meant to do, but I never thought he could do it."

"Then he has succeeded!" said Hedwig, clasping her hands in a sort of ecstasy.

"He has, and it may prove decisive for to-morrow. The man must have ridden like a devil to do it; it's about the smartest thing that the manœuvres have to show."

"I am glad that it is one of our patrols that has done it," said Hedwig, more quietly. "Are you not, papa?"

"Yes, I am glad."

He paused for a moment, just before putting his foot in the stirrup, and then added, as though with an effort: "And I am glad that it is Pletze who has done it. I always knew that he had the right stuff in him, but the opportunity of showing that it is there does not always come. His patrol has been the most active of all; it was only this forenoon that he managed to interrupt an important telegram." ("I helped him to do that!" thought Hedwig with swelling heart.) "Positively he seems to me everywhere at the same time. Yes, he is a splendid young fellow, and with a future before him, no doubt."

Although out here upon the house-steps it was almost dark, the colonel avoided looking at his daughter as he said it. It was just because he was aware of bearing a grudge towards the man who had cheated her hopes and his own, that he was determined not to scrimp him of even one atom of justice.

CHAPTER XIV.

WITH a sound as of distant thunder in her ears Thekla awoke on the morning of this critical fourteenth of September.

"What is it, mamma? what is it?" she asked, rubbing the sleep out of her blue eyes, and looking in vain appeal towards the second bed, on which Frau Elsner was still slumbering sweetly, one large, white hand peacefully reposing on the top of the red cotton coverlet which was all that the "Silberner Krug" could afford to its guests.

But long before her voice had pierced to her mother's consciousness Thekla's own senses had cleared. She had identified that far-off thunder as the voice of cannon, and had remembered that this was the last day of the big manœuvres.

Although, for want of proper guidance, the Elsners had hitherto seen far less of actual operations than had Millar, Thekla's inflammable imagination had stood her in good stead, by filling up the unavoidable gaps. So successfully had the measured footfall of troops on the march—that most magical of all rhythms—the sight of galloping horses, and the rattle of musketry transported her in spirit on to an actual field of battle that there were moments when she found herself assailed by symptoms of genuine alarm. The hopeless bewilderment in which she looked on—

utterly without clue to the signification of these seemingly erratic movements—far from diminishing her interest, seemed rather to heighten it. Exactly because of her ignorance, the thing was to her almost more real than even to Hedwig von Grunewalde, whose knowledge enabled her, in her cooler moments, to look behind the scenes, while to Thekla the events happening around her took upon themselves the gigantic dimensions of the unknown.

Yet, though she understood nothing, she was determined to see everything, and this determination it was which put an unwonted vigour into the shake which she now applied to her mother's shoulder, calling, the while, into her ear:—

"Quick, mamma, quick! They have begun already!"

Was not this the day of days? The one which would perhaps afford her the sight, the hope of which had brought her here? For among all the glimpses of horsemen she had had, not one had afforded her the view of a certain broad-shouldered, golden-haired dragoon lieutenant, whom for six weeks now her eyes had wearied after. It was her last chance of seeing him as she wanted to see him, seated sword in hand upon his charger, and with words of command on his lips.

Never before and never after did mother and daughter end their toilets as rapidly as they did on this day. Frau Elsner's corset, indeed, remained half laced, and even the little curls on Thekla's temples were spared the burning-iron, to-day—*à la guerre comme à la guerre!*

In less than half an hour Herr Elsner, fidgetting in the adjacent apartment, but anxious not to have his impatience discovered, had the satisfaction of welcoming his family to a hasty breakfast.

"Good news!" he greeted them in the best of spirits. "I have been out for information, and by good luck stumbled upon Mr. Millar in the company of a general, to whom he introduced me—a very polite gentleman; he has offered to show us the way to a point of vantage—seems to know exactly what is coming. They are waiting for us at the 'Grüner Adler,' and I promised we should not keep them long."

Having, in obedience to this hint, almost choked themselves over their coffee, and once more made sure that their hats were sitting fast, mother and daughter raced for the hired carriage, which, ready furnished with provisions and wraps, was waiting at the inn-door.

In front of the "Grüner Adler," the two Englishmen were already in position.

"It is *too* kind of you—are you really going to show us a battle?" meltingly enquired Frau Elsner, as General Russel was introduced.

"I have some hopes of doing so. It is pretty clear by this time that the enemy's chief attack is going to be directed towards the left wing of Army 1; we cannot go far wrong, therefore, by placing ourselves on the south ridge of the Pleser valley. Mind you follow me closely, Herr Elsner, or I can promise nothing."

In the abnormally crowded streets, along which eager sightseers were pouring in, and on every conceivable sort of vehicle—their own feet included—the injunction was far from superfluous. The usually so modest and retiring Reising seemed, all at once, to have taken upon itself the bustle and importance of a capital; the excitement of the last phase of the great military game seemed to have caught even the most indifferent.

It was an excitement which spread far over the country roads, and even on to the grassy eminence towards which General Russel's unerring instinct guided his little party, and upon which a few groups of spectators had already begun to collect. As yet they had had but little to gaze at but the sea of white mist in which the wide landscape had been wrapped since early morning, above whose surface the observation balloon soared as yet useless, and from which only the higher ridges and here and there a church spire emerged; but when precisely at half-past nine the Elsner party reached the small plateau, the white waves had begun slowly to roll away towards the horizon, and the red and yellow of the autumn-tinted woods, glistening with the double brilliancy of sunshine and of freshly drenched leaves, to break through the heavy veil. Even now, with streaks of mist still trailing in the valley, hovering more densely along the line of the river, the advantages of the position chosen were evident, and became more so as every few minutes disclosed more of the bodies of troops that were preparing to engage in the coming contest. Large portions of the first, defending, as well as of the second, attacking army were clearly to be distinguished with the naked eye, while a field-glass sufficed to enable the General to identify most of the troops engaged.

"That is the thirty-ninth division over there, in a line with the forest; and that group I take to be the right wing of the forty-sixth division. The reserve of Army 1 has been ordered to the front, I see; it is making tremendous efforts to arrive in time for the attack, but I fancy the collision will take place before they reach. That artillery is being pushed forward at a desperate pace."

"Oh, it is almost *too* exciting!" exclaimed Thekla in one of her accesses of mingled rapture and alarm, by far the strongest that had assailed her yet, since up to now she had seen but fragments of the picture which was beginning to unfold itself before her eyes. She had left the carriage and advanced to the edge of the small plateau, whose grassy surface, almost bare of trees, afforded an outlook from three sides, the view of the fourth only being blocked by a stretch of forest.

"Those dreadful cannons, they quite upset me!" sighed Frau Elsner, who had preferred to retain her seat, with its comfortable proximity to the provision basket.

"There is no doubt about its being a most interesting spectacle," pronounced Herr Elsner. "It almost seems to me to verge on the—well, on the grand."

Millar alone said nothing, partly because he was too absorbed in looking through his field-glass, but also because he was not yet clear about his own impressions. Just at first, despite the extended view, he had not been satisfied. Those moving bodies of troops, becoming more and more conspicuous as the mist rolled away, were numerous, certainly, but viewed from here, with the wide, undulating landscape around them, they appeared, in the first moment, to be almost as small as toy soldiers, of an insignificance that was well-nigh comical by comparison with the long, swelling lines of ground, the vast complexes of field among which they moved. Even the boom of the cannon—impossible to dwarf—seemed strangely out of proportion with these mannikins down there. It was one of the disappointments inseparable from distance, and it did not last. Already by degrees so small as to elude Millar's own notice, both his eye and his mind were getting used to this apparent disproportion. The real size of those seeming mannikins, the real importance of their measured movements, began to be borne in upon him so irresistibly that before he had been standing there for an hour he found himself watching their every evolution with an interest as breathless as, if less exclamatory than, that of Thekla Elsner. It was no longer the landscape that dominated them, but they who dominated the landscape. Despite the General's comments, it was difficult for an outsider to get any clue to the plan of action below, difficult even to distinguish the two armies from each other; all that remained clear was that all these bodies of infantry, of which fresh ones were almost incessantly becoming visible, those lines of artillery, those flying groups of cavalry—puppets mounted upon rats, they looked from here—were not moving at random, but in obedience to some one will, which acted upon them as directly as the will of the chess-player acts upon the pieces on the board, that they were not units, but parts of a whole, inseparable members of one body.

And the more they began to swarm, the closer they drew together, the more did even the cool-blooded Millar feel the excitement of the moment gain upon him. This was somthing like the "big effect" which he had hungered after.

"The collision cannot be far off now," presently said General Russel. "If I see aright, that is the Kaiser on the ridge over there."

"The Kaiser!" Thekla gazed with awe-stricken eyes towards the group of mounted figures moving against the sky-line, among which other uniforms than German were to be distinguished—representatives of foreign armies who were sharing the place of honour. Millar, with the aid of his glass, could pick out the familiar scarlet jacket of the English military attaché at Berlin, standing in close proximity to the dark-green tunic of his Russian colleague. It was not Germany alone that was looking on, nor royalty alone, it was Europe as well.

On this side of the valley, too, the ridge was growing more lively, invaded ever more by the sightseers who had discovered its advantages.

"If only one could get a glimpse behind that tract of forest!" said the General, almost fretfully. "It's impossible to see from here whether they are bringing up any troops from the south. If so, we shall presently be in a hot place."

Somehow or other the General as well as Millar perhaps thanks to Hedwig, had managed to identify themselves entirely with Army 1.

“ Ah, here is someone who is sure to have information.”

Millar, turning, perceived that Hedwig, with the eternally perspiring Johann behind her, had just emerged on to the plateau.

“ Fräulein von Grunewalde, you have come just in time; I am sure you can tell us what is happening behind that square of wood. Are they going to catch us from that side, too?”

Hedwig, as she checked her horse, gaily shook her head.

“ No, General, they are not; it is we who are going to catch them. We found out in time that those trenches were a mere sham, intended to lure us into the belief that they felt too weak to attack, and during the night the commanding general moved two divisions up to strengthen his left wing. Without this discovery we should probably not have been able to stand our ground.”

“ I always suspected those trenches; but who was it who unmasked them?”

“One of the patrols of our regiment.”

“ Oh, look, how terribly near those cannon are standing!” exclaimed Thekla, too absorbed in the spectacle below to pay any attention to the amazon’s presence. “ They *are* cannon, are they not?”

“ Take my glass, Fräulein Elsner, you will see better,” said Millar, her nearest neighbour.

Hedwig’s head turned sharply. Elsner? So, that was she? The name she had had by heart for long, but the face she had never yet seen. As she now gazed upon it her heart grew heavy within her; what chance, indeed, could she, with her insignificant height, her irregular features, have against this golden-haired, perfect-limbed goddess? Yes, he had chosen well, if the soul was only half as beautiful as the body.

"That patrol almost deserves a laurel wreath," the General was saying beside her. "Under whose command did it stand?"

Hedwig glanced towards Thekla and did not immediately answer. It would be easy to pretend that she had not heard the question. She had almost resolved on evasion, when an irresistible curiosity pushed her to try the experiment of pronouncing the name.

"It was Lieutenant Pletze's patrol," she said, more distinctly than was quite necessary, and in the same moment found herself gazing into Thekla's perturbed and astonished eyes.

"You know him?" Fräulein Elsner was asking, quite unmindful of the formality of introduction.

"I can't help knowing him since he is in my father's regiment," said Hedwig, coldly.

"And he has done—something? I don't quite understand."

"He has obtained information which was very difficult to obtain and very important. It is a great success for him. He is being congratulated on all sides."

"Oh, I am so glad!" said Thekla, almost in the same tone in which Hedwig had said those same words yesterday; and for a moment, as the two girls looked at each other, there was a smile on either pair of lips, only that Hedwig's smile had a signification of its own, while Thekla's blue eyes were all unconsciousness. What could she know of Colonel von Grunewalde's past plans, or of things which had been the common gossip of the regiment?

A remark of General Russel's put a rapid end to the brief dialogue.

"The order for the chief attack has evidently been given. Matters are going to look more lively now."

Instantly every scrap of attention turned again to the prospect below, over which, within the last five minutes, a new, almost ominous, animation had come. From over the crests of the ridges, from out of the strips of forest, from behind the shelter of houses, troops were pouring in what looked like endless succession. Upon a small elevation close at hand, a battery, hitherto silent, began to rend the air with its portentous voice. It was almost too much for the military enthusiasm of poor Frau Elsner, who, with her hands over her ears, sank back resignedly among her cushions. The galloping horses of the orderlies, darting about from one troop to the other, began visibly to multiply, varied by a good sprinkling of messengers upon wheels.

And always more men and more horses appearing as though stamped from the earth, long lines of them, compact bodies of them closing and unclosing, as the formation of the ground demanded, yet all moving as though guided by one hand. Sometimes a company of infantry starting up from behind a strip of brushwood, to run, rifle in hand, across an open space, and drop again invisible when shelter was gained; sometimes no more than a long line of flashes, followed by the rattle of the shots, to betray the presence of fighters. Occasionally, in the intervals between the firing, the hoarse hurrahs of the attacking bodies, rising from the plain below. The air began to smell of gunpowder, and the view at places to be obscured by the low-hanging cannon smoke.

"I—I am almost frightened," acknowledged Thekla. "Are they really not going to hurt each other?"

The question was scarcely as ridiculous as it sounded. Even a less lively imagination than Thekla's might well, under this stress of impressions, have lost its bearings. No use just then in reminding oneself that those two masses of men, moving so relentlessly against each other, were not antagonists but comrades, that their rifles were loaded with nothing more deadly than powder, and the edges of their swords not sharpened—human nerves, caught by the excitement of the contest, refused to accept these prosaic facts. The mere sight of this mass of men and of arms, heaped together upon so small a piece of the earth, and supported by this profusion of scientific appliances, the consciousness of the working of a vast yet minute organisation making itself felt through it all, was enough to produce a certain illogical tightening of the heart. True, these men were not killing each other, but they were exercising themselves in the art —doing their best to learn the killing trade in the most correct and effective manner.

"It wants only bloodshed to make it real," thought Millar.

To him the strange sensation of dread was less vague in form than to the others, all his impressions crystallising, so to say, around one tangible thread of thought. These masses of troops, which he yet knew to represent an almost negligible quantity of the German army, had ended by awakening in him a feeling akin to panic. If merely to play at war looked as formidable as this, what must war itself look like, with two million of men standing under arms instead of their twentieth fraction? In his artificially-heated fancy those absent phalanxes seemed to rise from behind the actual ranks, swelling them to gigantic proportions, causing the air to ring with the tramp of their feet, and the landscape to shine with the glint of their rifle-barrels. And in his fancy too he saw the miniature army of red-coated soldiers, of whom only the future could say whether they would not one day stand opposed to these; although each one of them was a hero, what were their chances of not being drowned in the sea of foes?

"Numbers! yes, numbers!" Millar found himself murmuring, forgetful of the source of the thought, while at a few paces off, General Russel, with his glass to his eyes, and the calm but intense interest of the connoisseur, stood mutely observing.

But it was not alone the consciousness of numbers that pressed upon Millar just now. More yet it was the spectacle of the splendid working of the huge machine before him, which spoke of the wide-awake readiness of the brain behind it. Some of the methods by which the machine worked might come to be proved played out. Much of this magnificent show might be impossible on the battle-fields of the future; yet to this British patriot the thought scarcely brought comfort, followed as it was by the intense conviction that this was merely a question of phases—of the lack of opportunity to test the new conditions, an opportunity which South Africa was now giving, not to England alone, but to the world at large. And amongst those to profit from the object lesson this people would assuredly not be the last. The army which had brought the "old" warfare to its highest point of perfection might be expected to do the same for the "new"; for the alertness was there, the eagerness to learn, the intensity of interest which, far more than any momentary detail of method, vouched for the efficiency of the gigantic instrument.

"If there are lessons lying in the air, these are the people to profit by them, and even although they be lost upon us," thought Millar, still struggling with a nameless despondency.

"A quarter past twelve o'clock!" sighed Hedwig. "In a few minutes the signal for breaking off operations will be given, I suppose. I know we shall beat them back if only they give us time. It would be too enraging to be stopped before our victory is unmistakable. Oh, look, matters are becoming decisive now! Our infantry is advancing to meet the attack, and the cavalry has evidently been ordered to charge them in the flank. That is my father's regiment; they are the only dragoons on our side, you know. This group must have taken that farm-house for guiding their direction—the one with the four poplars behind it—but they will not reach it, I am sure they will not!"

With beating heart Thekla followed the cavalry advance; the regiment of the amazon's father was also the regiment of Lieutenant Pletze—she had just heard so. Had he rejoined it, or was he still on patrol? Thekla could not even guess and did not venture to ask, as she looked with all her might towards the plain, vainly hoping to pick out of the body of riders the only one that interested her.

"Will that firing never stop?" lamented Frau Elsner, as a redoubled volley crashed through the air.

Thekla uttered an exclamation of distress. "One of the horses is down!"

"Put his foot into a hole, probably," was the General's soothing explanation.

"But look, General, look!" Thekla was talking excitedly; "is that not one of the infantry soldiers lying on the ground over there near the farm-house? They are picking him up, are they not? What can have happened?"

"Over-fatigue, probably—it is scarcely hot enough for a sunstroke. Even mock war has its victims you see. If it had not, how could our ambulances show what they are worth?"

"There is the signal!" exclaimed Hedwig, in a tone of exasperation, as from the ridge on which stood the Imperial staff a trumpet-blast rose upon the air, repeated almost instantaneously from point to point, until the autumn landscape became hideous with a din of trumpet-blasts, carrying to the most distant troops the news that the great manœuvres were over, and dying away behind the forests with the faintness of an echo.

"They might have given us ten minutes more."

"But which side has won?" asked Thekla, bewildered.

"Neither," smiled the General. "Nobody ever wins outright in this particular class of warfare. I should say at a guess that Army 1 has had the best of it; but that point will not be decided until to-morrow at the official discussion."

"And there is nothing more to see?"

"Nothing but the dispersing of the troops. The firing has stopped already, you perceive."

Half an hour later the party had begun its homeward journey in the same order in which it had come. Hedwig rode close behind the Elsner carriage, not only because her road was the same as theirs, but also because to prolong her view of Thekla Elsner afforded her a strange satisfaction.

On the crowded road progress was slow; it was not until they had reached lower ground that a little more space was gained. Hedwig was about to put her horse into a trot when she became aware of a stand-still at the front. General Russel, leaning from his seat, was talking to an officer on horseback, while the Elsners, evidently impatient to get on, craned their necks enquiringly. The officer was making some statement, accompanied by a good deal of gesticulation.

"What is it?" asked Hedwig, coming up abreast of the first carriage.

"An accident, it seems—or rather several accidents. Several men have been hurt, and one officer."

"Of the 20th Dragoons," completed the horseman.

"Lieutenant Pletze?" asked Hedwig, with the swift instinct of coming evil.

The informant opened his eyes a little wider.

"Yes, it is he."

"He fell from his horse?"

"Yes—it appears so; but it does not seem quite clear how it happened. At any rate, he is gravely hurt; but his case is not the worst. There is a man dead of the 108th Regiment—of sunstroke, they say."

"Where is he?" asked Hedwig, trying to repress the anguish in her voice; but in that moment, from the second carriage, pressing up alongside, a flood of questions poured.

"Something has happened to Lieutenant Pletze?" enquired Herr Elsner, too much flurried to conceal his tremulous interest in the question.

"I knew that it could not end without some misfortune!" moaned Frau Elsner, wringing her plump hands. "What have they done to the poor young man?"

Thekla had not spoken yet, but looked from one person to the other with wide-open, terror-stricken eyes, as though appealing for help.

"He is badly hurt, either by his fall or from some other cause. He had returned with his patrol not ten minutes before the last attack, just in time to join the movement. His horse did not fall, but he dropped from it suddenly, and they picked him up unconscious; that is all I know."

"Where is he?" asked Hedwig again.

"In that farm over there—the one with the four poplars. They brought him under the nearest shelter until the ambulance could come up."

"I must go to him!" suddenly exclaimed Thekla, rising from her seat, while the colour began to flow back into her pale face.

"You are mad, Thekla!" said her father, with a shaky attempt at sternness.

Frau Elsner was already tremulously wiping her eyes.

"Poor young man! Poor young man! I knew it would end badly."

"Take me to him, mamma! He is dying, probably; and if you will not take me I shall go alone. Nothing shall stop me—nothing!"

Thekla spoke with flaming cheeks and marvellously shining eyes, rising for the second time from her seat as though to make good her words. It was evident that beside the one object in her mind nothing counted with her just now; the illusion of the field of battle had returned upon her with tenfold force. The mounted messenger of evil—a prosaic, broad-faced captain, he was—stared in a mixture of astonishment and admiration at her towering figure, then enquiringly towards General Russel.

"Lieutenant Pletze is a friend of us all," said the General, by way of saving the situation. "There can be no harm in our enquiring after his present state."

"By all means—by all means," agreed Elsner, thankful for any compromise.

Thekla sat down again, still breathing fast, and the carriages took the turn towards the farm-house.

It was into a big wooden barn that the lieutenant had been carried, where he lay bedded upon freshly-mown hay. To himself it was not by any means clear where he was, when, opening his eyes after a long interval of unconsciousness, he found Thekla Elsner's beautiful face bending closely over his own. Short of struggling with her there had been no means of keeping her out of the barn, recognising which Elsner had resigned himself to giving to this painfully unconventional meeting at least the sanction of his presence.

"Is he dying? Is he dying?" Thekla was asking, through the tears which, at sight of that prostrate form with the soldier's cloak flung over it, had begun to flow. It was not thus that she had thought to set eyes upon her warrior.

"No, he is not dying," said General Russel, turning from a rapid exchange of words with the doctor, in the course of which Millar had caught one or two expressions which mystified him strangely, as did also the sight of a red-stained shirt lying on the floor of the barn. Blood? Why, that was the one thing which had been wanting all through to put upon the picture the seal of reality!

"He is not dying, but he requires rest."

"Come, Thekla!" urged Herr Elsner, whom the shocking conspicuousness of the incident was keeping upon thorns. "You have been told that there is no danger."

The lips of the stricken man were seen to move, but it was only Thekla who could hear him murmur, "Farewell, my goddess!" as with a movement, pathetically uncertain by contrast with his usual vigour, he groped for her fingers.

Outside, immovable, upon Asra—her forehead drawn into deep, painful lines—Hedwig von Grunewalde was waiting for news. On reaching the farm she had been for a moment on the point of dismounting, but just as she threw down the reins she perceived Thekla precipitately alighting from the carriage. It was as though she had remembered something. Gathering up the reins once more she sat waiting, with set features, upright and rigid. Word being brought her that Lieutenant Pletze was in no danger, she did not wait to take leave of the others, but trotted away in silence, in the company of Johann alone.

"What was that the doctor was saying about a gunshot wound?" asked Millar of the General, as they came together out of the barn. "You surely don't mean to say——"

"That we load our rifles with bullets in manœuvre time? We certainly don't do that, and yet that's a bullet in Lieutenant Pletze's chest. Doctor Springer is not likely to make a mistake about that."

"But how can you explain——"

"I am not trying to explain; I am only stating the facts, which are that one man is dead and that three have been wounded in this morning's work."

"A mistake, I suppose? Some bungling between war and peace ammunitions?"

"Perhaps," said General Russel, in a tone which by no means put Millar's perplexities at rest.

CHAPTER XV.

"Kaltenthal, September 30th, 1900.

"*Dear Millar:—*

"I have been here for a week, paying my annual autumnal visit to my late wife's relatives, and, leisure being rather more ample than usual, I mean to give you the benefit of a spare hour, as well as a few items of information, which I instinctively feel that you are expecting.

"When we parted last I think both our minds were full of the same thing—the accidents at the manœuvres. Very likely yours has been full of it since; and, if I am not greatly mistaken, you have searched the newspapers and questioned every likely person you met in order to get at an explanation of this seemingly inexplicable incident. You will have done so in vain; these things do not get into print, nor are they spoken of aloud in this German Fatherland. And yet your curiosity has a right to be satisfied, which is one of my reasons (I have two of them) for writing to-day.

"Here, then, are the facts of the case, so far as they have come to my knowledge, and with the additional remark that they are intended strictly for yourself alone.

"During the last attack, when private Steiner of the 108th Infantry Regiment dropped dead and Lieutenant Pletze fell suddenly from his horse, there was at first no suspicion at all of the cause of these accidents. Cases of sudden death have occurred ere this during the manœuvres, since it requires a very sound set of heart nerves to withstand the amount of fatigue undergone by portions of the troops. But two other men had been hurt, although they did not fall; and, although neither of them knew that he had been hit by a rifle-bullet, one complained of a sharp pain in his knee, the other in his shoulder. At the ambulance the truth was quickly discovered, but instantly and instinctively hushed up. Meanwhile the true nature of Lieutenant Pletze's hurt had also been made clear, which led to a minute examination of the dead man, among whose thick hair the two small holes which the bullet had made in passing through his head, a little above the ear, were presently found. The next thing to examine was the premises, and these too brought their disclosures, for the big swing-gates of one of the farm outhouses—that poplar-backed farm which you doubtless remember—was found to be riddled with holes. A few bullets were picked up beyond the barn itself.

"To decide where exactly these shots had come from was felt, from the first, to be a well-nigh hopeless task. Judging from the disposal of the troops during the final attack, and taking the probable bearings of the direction, it could only be concluded in a general way that the shots had been fired out of the ranks either of the 42nd, the 76th, or the 159th Regiments. All of these had been completed by large bodies of reservists called in for the manœuvre weeks, and, not unnaturally, it was these which were thought of, in first line. But how fasten suspicion upon one individual more than upon another, when all have been acting, not as individuals at all, but only as atoms of one big whole? That is why the—very discreet and guarded—enquiry which had perforce to be started, soon dropped, under the consciousness of its own impotence. The lamentable spread of socialistic and even anarchistic tendencies among the lower classes was sufficiently known already; what would there be gained by making public the startling fact that the anarchist monster had actually found means of using the uniform of his Majesty's faithful soldiers as a mask for his purposes? Perhaps you remember what I told you once about the passions raised in the breast of a true anarchist by the mere sight of an army? Those shots fired on September 14th can, in my opinion, only have been fired by one or by several army enemies—men, most likely, whose dislike to fulfilling their duties as reservists had been artificially fostered. A mere mistake about the ammunition, such as you suggested, is out of the question. The strictness of our regulations would preclude the idea, even if a close examination of the depots had not proved everything to be in perfect order there. A certain number of packets of war ammunition, carefully stored and officially sealed up, lie indeed ready in such cases of emergency as, for instance, a serious riot; but not one of these had been either tampered with or removed. Those bullets, therefore, must have come from some outside source. What will you wager with me that the suppliers were also enemies of conscription? I will not enlarge further on this theme, preferring to leave you to draw your own conclusions unaided.

"I note without surprise the report of Fräulein Elsner's betrothal to Lieutenant Pletze. After that charming loss of self-control—charming even to such old eyes as mine—of which we were witness, it could not well have ended otherwise.

"And now I come to my second reason for writing. I promised once, when in the right humour, to jot down for you some of my own ideas regarding the details of that plan for obtaining a large army, without conscription in the Continental form, which has been advocated on more than one side; well, to-day I find myself in the right humour.

"Before starting, however, I must explain that when I say 'army' I really mean 'armies'; for nothing seems clearer to me than that an Empire which stands upon five continents cannot depend upon one army alone. Close contact with your 'basis' is given out even to our lieutenants as *the* fundamental principle of organisation in warfare; but when you have only one basis, and that is in London, what can the word mean to African or Asian troops? It follows that the Empire cannot be defended from London alone, and could not be, even with ten times our actual navy, since the weakening effect of distance can never be quite eliminated any more than can be the risks of sea journeys. If our scheme of Imperial defence is to be effective it must be comprehensive enough to embrace even the most distant and the most insignificant of the colonies. To follow up the question here would lead too far; bear in mind only that I plead for a multiplication of bases and a resultant more equal distribution of forces.

"The general outline of my idea as to how these forces should be raised you already have. Briefly put, it stands as follows: A skeleton army, of which the muscles, in time of war, are supplied by the nation, primitively trained by means of universal military education.

"The ideal result of the system would be to furnish the Empire, with every scholar having passed through an Elementary School, a future or possible rank-and-file soldier, a future or possible under officer with every frequenter of one of the Secondary Schools, and a future or possible officer in every High School student. No reason to jump to the conclusion that our schools are going to be transformed into barrack-yards; the matter is not nearly so black as it appears at first sight. While the huge size of modern armies puts upon the leaders far heavier demands than was the case in former times, this same size greatly diminishes the task of the subordinate individual, who virtually disappears in the mass. In one word, it has become far more difficult to command; but far easier to obey. A minimum of military efficiency will suffice for the soldier nowadays, and this minimum I should propose to procure to him in the following manner:—

"In the Elementary Schools nothing more need be done than to substitute for the usual gymnastic exercises some of a more distinctly military character—such as marching in step, of moving in line, of smartly obeying certain words of command, of squaring shoulders and straightening backs—all highly beneficial things even if looked at merely from a hygienic point of view, and certain to become the favourite part of school-work.

"In the Secondary Schools these exercises should be carried further, and the study of the British equivalent for the German *Exerzir Reglement* be cultivated, as well as the art of reading maps, which every educated Englishman should be able to read as easily as a book. Here also familiarity with the rifle should begin, for though I may have seemed to sneer at the would-be Wilhelm Tells, be sure that a shooting-class would have a prominent place in my programme. Though it led to familiarity only and to an acquaintance with the tremendous effects of modern weapons, it would—even without any ideal proficiency being attained—have served its end. Another desirable thing would be the awakening of interest in military matters by a judiciously conducted study of History, and by the bringing home to youthful minds the fact that every historical event of any importance has been the direct consequence of military success. Are these demands of so revolutionary a character that they need frighten off the fathers of future scholars?

"In the highest educational centres, the military knowledge gained would require to be enlarged only in those points which directly touch an officer's work, and only to that degree necessary to procure to him that minimum of efficiency of which I have already spoken. That this suffices has been proved over and over again by German reserve officers. Special studies, such as technical and medical, would generally determine the special branch of service in which the individual might eventually be employed. At the end of his term, a judiciously compiled military encyclopædia should be handed to each student in order to enable him privately to increase his military knowledge.

“Now as to the manner of making use of this mass of roughly prepared military material: My idea is that every British subject be liable, between his twentieth and his fortieth year, to be called to arms in case of war, taking his rank in the army according to his grade of education; and that up to his thirtieth year he be likewise liable to be called in three times for a course of exercises of four weeks’ duration each, during which the lower classes will have the opportunity of practically demonstrating what they know about a soldier’s duties, and the higher classes of showing what they are worth as officers. It is superfluous to point out that during the duration of the exercises this crowd of civilians—for I lay stress upon the point that they remain civilians—would have to submit to military discipline.

“Meanwhile the framework, slender and yet substantial, of this huge amateur army—as it may please you to call it, would be welding itself more firmly, growing more perfect every year, for only its perfection can give the guarantee that this mass of human material can, at the given moment, be brought into the desired shape, and moulded in the manner necessary. This rock-bed, or backbone, or whatever you choose to call it, must consist of volunteers alone, men who have chosen the profession of arms from conviction, and who have bound themselves for a sufficient number of years. Upon these, the peace soldiers, would fall the task of schooling what I may call the war soldiers, at the fixed drilling periods, of keeping the necessary registers, as well as watching over the preservation of the large stores of uniforms, arms, and other war appliances, which would, of course, have to lie constantly ready, as they do with the *cadre* of every regiment of every Continental army of any importance. Horses too can lie ready just as easily as rifles, if the German plan be adopted, with which by this time you are probably familiar.

"Objections to this scheme will be forthcoming, of course, in plenty. 'Nothing gained,' says someone, 'but a lot of inefficient soldiers.' 'We shall never want so many,' says another.

"Very true, we shall not want them. Considering that the British Empire, as I think I once pointed out to you, could raise something like two hundred and twenty army corps with far less strain upon the population than it costs Germany to raise twenty-three—(a little meditation on these figures will be instructive, believe me),—and since nothing like that quantity can possibly be required, it is of course an almost negligible proportion of these primitively-trained young men who will ever make practical demonstration of their training. What then? Show me, if you can, what we should have lost—even though we gain nothing—by giving to our boys a notion of discipline, a touch of smartness, and the faculty of handling a rifle? Will Master John Bull succeed less well in life because he has learnt the value of punctuality? Will his health suffer because he has been forced to hold himself straighter than he found convenient?

"And the cost? I hear you ask. Ah, well, the cost, that is indeed the sore point of every scheme that deserves the name of one. The cost would not doubt be considerable, but not quite so alarming as it looks at a distance; for that skeleton army of which I speak need not be bigger—my impression is that it could be considerably smaller—than our present actual army; neither do I pretend to indicate the figure to which, in time of need, it ought to be capable of expanding. Considering how much we spend now and how little we get for it—among European army budgets ours stands second, while in size our army ranks far behind even that of Italy—would it not be worth while to spend more in order to gain immeasurably? Big ends cannot be reached by small means. If the Empire is proved to be too expensive a concern to run, then drop it, by all means; only don't let yourself be lured into the belief that it can be run on indefinitely on the same identical lines as hitherto.

"To those who, like you, object to my scheme because it is too little like conscription, I should like to point out that I by no means expect it to do *everything* for the army. For instance, I do not look to it for our supply of technical troops—nor should I fill our higher commands even with the best-born and best-educated of 'war soldiers.' It is the skeleton that must supply these.

"Those who object to the scheme because it is too like conscription, may partly be conciliated by the reflection that by the time a man is thirty, the debt of three times four weeks of his time which his country claims would be paid off, and that by the time he is forty even the remote liability of having to take up arms is finally cancelled.

"To this class of objectors, I have yet a further concession to make, which occurs to me in the moment of writing. There is no reason that I can see why, in case of war, the first appeal should not be made to voluntary effort. Let the country say, in fact: 'We require soldiers; those who are willing may step forward. If their number is sufficient so much the better, if not, we shall complete it by compulsory enrolment—

"'*Und kommst du nicht willig so brauch ich Gewalt!*'

"Knowing that she possesses this power of compulsion, and knowing also that even the most unlikely of the volunteers has mastered the A B C of his profession, how much more serenely will England speak then than she is able to speak now, how much less inclined to scoff will be those enemies who now gloat, grinning over army figures!

"Very rough ideas, these, and requiring correction at many points, no doubt. I give them you for what they are worth. If they help you to any conclusions, this last hour will have been well spent by

"Yours sincerely,
"PHILIP RUSSEL."

CHAPTER XVI.

In the Elsners' big reception-room several articles of furniture had been pushed aside to make room for the tall, well-shaped fir tree, chosen carefully out of the artificial forest which at this season springs up on every German market-place, large or small—for Christmas was close at hand, and the whole of the Fatherland making ready to celebrate what is the family feast *par excellence*. Nor did the Elsners lag behind their neighbours. Since Thekla had celebrated her eighteenth birthday in the summer, there could not indeed be said to be any more children in the family; which was why Frau Elsner had found it more dignified to explain that she intended, on the 26th, to give a Christmas treat on a big scale to all the children of all her acquaintances. There was, however, good reason to suppose that even if those acquaintances had all been childless, the tree would yet have been profusely decorated—"just for the fun of the thing," as to herself Frau Elsner acknowledged.

"It would not seem like Christmas, either to Thekla or to me, without a tree," she explained, half apologetically, to Lieutenant Pletze, who, on the day before the "Holy Evening," was giving the ladies his aid in the disposal of the last ornaments—"and, once there is a tree, it has to be well filled up."

Although his hurt was more than three months old now, it was only within the last fortnight that Pletze had re-entered the Elsner house—in the body, that is to say, for the whole of his soul had dwelt there continually, ever since the day on which Herr Elsner, summoned by a peremptory message, had returned from his sick-bed visit, agitated and radiant, and bringing the announcement of having solemnly promised to the lieutenant his daughter in marriage.

"Without even consulting her," finished the manufacturer, with one of his helpless attempts at pleasantry, meant to mask an undignified emotion.

"And he insisted, too, upon its being made public at once, before any chatter could get about concerning that—well, that little imprudence at the manœuvres!"

In words there was no answer; but the silent embrace in which mother and daughter were already holding each other said all that could possibly be said.

Then had passed many weary and yet ecstatic weeks, during which Thekla had perforce to be content to live upon the shadow of her dream. Although the wound was not dangerous, it was serious enough to necessitate a long seclusion, which—German ideas of propriety being what they are—meant for the lovers complete separation. The preliminaries of the engagement had indeed been startlingly unconventional; but that had not been Herr Elsner's fault, and all the more was he determined that the engagement itself should be conducted on the most approved "correct" principles. Thus it was that for more than two months notes and flowers and photographs formed the only visible links between Thekla and her invisible hero, of whom all Mannstadt already knew her to be the promised bride. Millar had known it even earlier than the rest of the world. When, two days after the return from Reising, passing by an open window, he heard Thekla's charming mezzo-soprano rapturously pouring out the words—

> "Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben,
> Es hat ein Traum mich berückt:
> Wie hätt Er denn unter Allen
> Mich Arme erhöht und beglückt!" *

he felt sure of the truth.

"The accident which was wanted has happened," he said, with accurate divination.

In these days existence was to Thekla as a dream, which, delicious in itself, was to have a more delicious awakening. The heaven might be very far overhead as yet, but at least it was cloudless—and yet no, not absolutely cloudless, since in these long, idle hours of ecstatic anticipation there were moments in which certain rather inconvenient memories, raising their frail but obstinate heads, would whisper, "We are still here!" But their stupid little attempts at irritation could not seriously disturb a soul as serene as Thekla's; indeed, but for the existence of one small but awkwardly tangible circumstance, she would probably have remained deaf to the whisperings of those small tongues, which, if they were not exactly tongues of conscience, were at least the voice of some portion of her soul not feeling itself in perfect harmony with the rest.

In the rapture of the first welcome, and the shock of alarm which the altered appearance of her *fiancé* brought with it, all minor uneasinesses were forgotten. A man—more especially a man used to a large amount of fresh air—does not live in a room for two months without bearing the marks of the confinement. Seeing him so bleached and thin-cheeked Thekla could have cried for grief, if she had not already been crying for joy, and even while acknowledging to herself that the change was undeniably becoming. He had always looked a little too aggressively healthy, and what he had lost for the moment in vigour he had gained in the quality called "interest."

Since then his daily visits had made of him already a member of the family, so much so that when the Christmas tree was put up it seemed quite impossible to decorate it without his aid. It had been a time of radiant and undisguised happiness to every one concerned—to the beaming parents almost as much as to the young people themselves. The lieutenant's erstwhile scruples had been swallowed up so entirely in the rapture of his love that he sometimes found it difficult to believe that they had ever existed. He had done his best to escape from the happiness which Fate was thrusting upon him, but, finding himself beaten in the contest, was at the bottom of his soul far too much a natural man not naturally and simply to accept the gift for what it was worth. For the moment, at least, he had grasped the fact that so long as he was sure of himself the world's esteem need not count.

"Do you want any more of these sugar sausages?" asked Frau Elsner, on this 23rd of December, of the lieutenant, who, standing upon a wooden chair, was hanging ornaments, both eatable and uneatable, upon every branch he could reach. His height made him particularly useful as a decorator, seeing that for him a chair sufficed where ordinary mortals would have required a ladder. Upon the big drawing-room table lay whole rows of chocolate animals and wheelbarrows and cannons; regiments of sugar babies and of sugar fruit, of glass balls and of filigree baskets, were being ranged under Frau Elsner's care, while Thekla, with an apronful of treasures, stood beside the chair, handing up one piece after the other—an occupation which by no means excluded the possibility of getting one's fingers significantly squeezed, or even of having one's whole hand detained for a longer time than was rigorously necessary for the purpose of taking from it a piece of gingerbread. Good Frau Elsner was scarcely to be considered an obstacle to these harmless interludes. Although etiquette prescribed the formality of her presence, her instincts—and perhaps her memories—made of her the most convenient of chaperons, who, but for the strict orders received, would gladly have effaced herself altogether.

Not that she was not enjoying herself almost as well as Thekla. Every new bag unpacked, every new disclosure of tinsel stars, or flowers, or ships, threw her into a state of delight as great as though she had been ten years old instead of thirty-seven. The miniature lanterns amused her so much that she had to light one to see the effect; and the sugar babies very nearly tempted her into making one of those innocent but inelegant jokes to which even quite unfrivolous people

—provided they are Germans—seem to be irresistibly pushed by the sight of an affianced couple. Fortunately the necessity of disentangling a mass of glittering threads, destined to be draped about the fir bushes, took off her attention in time.

"They might have been cut off your head, my love," said Pletze, with the audacity of an accepted lover, holding up the ends of one of the golden strands so as to let it catch the light.

"That dreadful snow!" laughed Thekla, in order to cover her confusion—she could not yet bear his admiration calmly—"we ought to have left it to the last."

"I daresay we ought," said the lieutenant, whose uniform likewise was richly powdered with the artificial snowflakes. "It does not sting, like the real article, but it sticks far harder."

"I think the time is come for hanging up the angel," pronounced Frau Elsner; "but even you will not manage without the ladder for that."

The folding-ladder having been procured, and the plaster of Paris angel, blowing a tin trumpet and spreading spun-glass wings, handed up to the lieutenant, Frau Elsner stepped back for another comprehensive view.

"There are too few candles—I felt sure of it. This tree seems to eat them up. But I have some more up-stairs."

She looked from Thekla to her lover, and then back again in obvious indecision, before she added—

"You will not find them easily; I had better fetch them myself."

At the door she turned.

"I shall not be gone a minute," she said, in a tone that contained all sorts of warnings, mixed with a trifle of supplication.

After all, what harm could come of it? For a brief abandonment of her post no moment could be better chosen than this one. The ladder was so high and so awkward, and he perched on the very top of it—why, he would scarcely have time even to kiss her hand comfortably before the chaperon was on them again.

In point of fact he made no immediate attempt to do even this much. The closing of the door had indeed very clearly brought home to his mind that almost for the first time since the engagement he was absolutely alone with his *fiancée,* but Frau Elsner's veiled appeal had reminded him that he was being trusted, and he meant to act up to that trust, and even beyond it—if it did not prove too difficult. Which was the reason why he said in a wonderfully sober tone: "That angel is all right, I think; but there are lots of empty places up here; since I am hoisted so high already I had better fill them up. What can you give me for the purpose?"

"These silver cones, perhaps; ah, and here is a whole packet of chocolate guns; you had better stick them up there among the branches where I shall not see them; I detest guns."

"Since when?" he asked, laughing.

"Since the manœuvres, of course. They remind me of that dreadful moment."

She never spoke of the shooting accident otherwise than as "that dreadful moment." In her imagination it loomed even bigger than the reality had done. A hundred times already she had questioned Pletze on his sensations, both mental and physical, refusing to be satisfied with his light-hearted replies. It suited her to dwell on the risk which he had run, and which vaguely magnified for her the figure of her hero.

"One would think you took a special pleasure in harassing your own nerves," he now said gaily as he took the chocolate guns from her hands. "Besides, I have told you that the dreadfulness looked far bigger than it was."

Thekla got almost a little angry. She did not like to have her ideas disarranged.

"Perhaps you want to prove to me that it is not a dreadful thing to get a bullet in the middle of your chest?"

"Considering the consequences for myself, I should say it was about the best thing that could happen to a man," said Pletze stolidly, yet with a shadow of malice peeping from under his yellow moustache.

Thekla hung her head, reddening under the significance of the glance which had come from the top of the ladder.

"Oh, don't remind me! I did not know what I was doing. I wonder what you really thought of me then?"

"I thought that perhaps you cared for me one quarter as much as I had cared for you ever since the press ball."

"It's a wonder how well you managed to keep your secret," said Thekla, with a pout that was also a smile, for he had not really managed to keep it at all.

"Oh, that was all idiocy," pronounced the lieutenant, with a wave of the arm so comprehensive that the folding-ladder came in danger of toppling over. "When a man's good luck is *too* great, you see, it's rather apt to injure his powers of reasoning."

"Ever since the press ball!" Thekla fell into a moment of blissful reflection, out of which grew that fearful, hesitating question which is bound to be asked at one stage or the other of every engagement.

"And before that, Conrad? Did you really never care for anybody before?"

"Never in that way," he said, after a pause of conscientious reflection.

"Are there different ways of caring?" she asked, but before he had time to reply, added quickly: "Yes, I know that there are."

"*You* know that there are?" There was a sudden astonishment in the eyes that looked down upon her.

"I mean—I can quite understand that one can like a person without—without being in love with him." Thekla broke off in confusion, busying herself with the bonbons in her apron. All at once she seemed to have come to a resolution.

"Oh, Conrad, I want so much to tell you something!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes full to his.

In an alarm which put upon his whole frame a sudden immobility, he looked down at her, startled for one moment by the flood of red sweeping her forehead, reassured in the next by the helpless candour of the eyes.

"Tell it me," he said gently.

"Not while you are up there; I should have to speak too loud. Oh, Conrad, take care!" for already he was descending the ladder with a perilous precipitancy, catching his spurs in the steps, and dropping a handful of the chocolate guns, which went to pieces unheeded upon the polished floor.

"And now, let us hear all about it," he said with a smile meant to reassure himself as much as her—"before we are interrupted," he added, with an apprehensive glance towards the door.

Those extra candles had evidently been much more difficult to find than Frau Elsner had expected; in his heart the lieutenant prayed that they might not be forthcoming for just another five minutes. He had drawn Thekla down beside him on the sofa, and was looking at her enquiringly, repressing his impatience at sight of her disturbance, and holding her hand in his, as though to give her courage. And she needed it, poor child, ignorant as she was of the probable import of what she was about to say, too little acquainted with his individuality to know what judgment to expect of him, yet determined, all the same, to be done with this oppressive secret, the one point which had not been cleared up between them, the one thing that kept her from the full enjoyment of her happiness. So good an opportunity might not come again for long; who knew when the accidents of chaperonage would afford another *tête-à-tête?*

In hurried, unsteady words, she began to tell him of her acquaintance with Gustav Hort, and of the interest which his theories had aroused in her.

"His theories far more than himself, you know," she anxiously explained, and added, as though in further apology—"even mamma liked to listen to him when he began to speak so eloquently of the wrongs of the poor."

Pletze listened gravely, still holding her hand. He was waiting. This could not be all. The fresh, fragrant scent of the pine branches, hanging as though distilled upon the warm air of the room, wrapped him round as he sat there, listening, taking vague notice the while of the feathery artificial snowflake which had got caught upon Thekla's sleeve, and of the one long thread of golden tinsel—not more golden than her hair—which lay across her breast.

"Did he—that man—ever take any liberties with you?" he asked abruptly, in a far harder voice than she had ever known in him.

Thekla flushed scarlet. "Oh, Conrad—never! How would he dare?"

"But he was in love with you, was he not?"

"I—I am afraid so."

"And you?"

"I liked him, he interested me. I even thought I liked him very much until I saw you, and then everything else ceased to exist, and he of course also."

"Will you swear to me that he never kissed you?"

"Not even the tips of my fingers! I should have died of shame if he had tried to."

It was impossible to doubt either her tone or her eyes.

"And if I try to?" asked Pletze gaily, like a man suddenly delivered of a load, and catching her quickly to himself—really it was not his fault if those candles took such an unreasonable time to find.

"I wonder what can be the pleasure of giving me such a fright," he said presently, as Thekla was trying to get her hair to lie smooth again. "I am really sorry for that poor devil of an engineer, but I don't see why we need spoil our humour by talking about him."

It was Thekla now who took hold of his hand.

"That is not quite all, Conrad," she faltered in a great hurry, for overhead a door was heard closing. "He never took any liberties—in that way, but once he wrote to me—with a pamphlet which he sent me."

"A mere note, I suppose," suggested Pletze quickly. "Why did he not write to your mother?"

"That is just it, Conrad. Mamma knew nothing about it; it was not exactly a note, you see—in fact it was what he said in it about the future, and about the sort of social reform work which only a man and woman working together can hope to accomplish, that first made me understand that he cared for me."

"And you?" asked Pletze, just as he had asked before, and with a quick return of the same coldness.

"I—I answered it. No, Conrad, don't let go my hand, or I shall never have the courage to finish. There was nothing wrong in the letter; of course I quite ignored his hints about the future, and only thanked him for the pamphlet, and spoke about the interest I felt in the subject; but still I *did* answer him, and in secret, too, and it is the thought of this that I cannot quite get rid of—the thought of that letter of mine which perhaps he has kept and which perhaps gave him a false impression. How do I know what use he may make of it some day? I have been wanting to tell you about it ever since we were engaged, but I never had the chance until to-day. It was wrong of me to write that letter, was it not?"

"It was, at any rate, very imprudent," said Pletze, speaking still in the ungracious tone of a jealousy that is not entirely quieted, and yet already half disarmed by the convincing candour of the appeal.

The blue of Thekla's eyes turned suddenly grey with tears.

"I thought you would say so! I suppose I shall never be quite happy again; how can I be if I cannot get back that letter?"

"You shall get it back!" said Pletze, impulsively catching hold again of both her hands, and peering earnestly into her face, while his own lips quivered. He was one of those men who are constitutionally unable to bear a woman's tears; at sight of those wet eyes his last resistance was gone.

Thekla stared, not understanding. "Get it back? How can I?"

"I myself will bring it you."

Her eyes grew wider yet, with affright, it would seem.

"But what are you going to do? Fight a duel with him?"

He burst into a relieving laugh. After all she was only a child, and for a child's foolishness there was another measure than for a woman's follies.

"No, I am not going to fight a duel; we don't manage *everything* by duels in the army. I daresay I shall find means to induce this man, who appears to be a gentleman, to hand over the letter quite peacefully, or else to give me the assurance of its destruction."

"But, Conrad——"

"No objections, my sweet one, or I shall think you are afraid of my seeing the contents of that letter." He looked at her with a remnant of suspicion, which, once more, could not hold before the sincerity of her eyes.

"Only give me his name and address and leave the rest to me." Then, more hurriedly, because of the approaching footsteps, "I shall hurt him as little as I can manage, be sure of that."

"I positively thought those candles had been stolen since yesterday," announced Frau Elsner, bustling in heated and a little breathless, her hands full of pasteboard boxes and her chaperon's conscience obviously troubled. "I have not been away very long, have I? Oh, you are done with the angel, I see," and she threw an apprehensive glance at the couple on the sofa.

"With the angel and with other things as well," said Pletze calmly as he rose to relieve her of the boxes.

Just before leaving he found an opportunity for a few more private words with his *fiancée*.

Thekla, with her own hands, was brushing from his coat the flakes of the troublesome "snow" which clung so obstinately to the blue surface. It was a labour of love in more senses than one—her feeling towards the "double-coloured cloth" which represented for her all the glory and all the power of the army had always been an almost personal one. "I cannot bear to see even a speck upon your uniform," she had said with smiling pride, as she took the brush in hand. While she plied it carefully Pletze contrived to whisper:—

"I shall bring it you to-morrow; it shall be my Christmas present to you. What do you say? Although it costs nothing, peace of mind is not a bad sort of Christmas present, is it?"

CHAPTER XVII.

But Lieutenant Pletze's Christmas present to Thekla was, after all, to cost a heavier price than either of them supposed.

The winter afternoon was beginning to close in as he left the Elsners' house, and large flakes of snow—not an artificial snow this, but real, genuine flakes which both stung and chilled—began to thicken the air and hurry on darkness.

"The weather is in my favour," thought the lieutenant, as he turned up the collar of his cloak well above his ears. "All the chances in the world of finding him at home."

In this he calculated rightly, for Gustav Hort, just then, was at home, engaged—while Pletze began to thread unknown streets in quest of the exceedingly out-of-the-way address which Thekla had given him—with another and quite a different sort of visitor, whose appearance had evidently not been welcome; for the engineer, seated, pencil in hand, before his shabby writing-table, with a half-covered sheet of paper before him, was listening with visible impatience to the plaints being poured into his ears.

"But, my good fellow, what do you expect me to do, after all?" he asked at last, amused and irritated, yet on the whole more irritated than amused; "I am neither your Mariedl's grandpapa nor her nurse; and if she finds that one adorer is too little for her taste, I don't see how I can prevent it, even if I do happen to live on the same floor."

This was not the first time that Franz Knopf had come to him with his tale of love, which latterly had been turning into a tale of woe. As long ago as last June, when still working at the local line, now completed, Hort had known that this apple-cheeked Benjamin among his workmen had exchanged vows with the bright-eyed servant girl who represented the entire domestic establishment of his neighbours on the third floor. Perhaps it was because he indirectly owed his first acquaintance with Mariedl to Hort that the youthful and by no means reticent lover had, from the first, marked down the engineer as a confidant.

"If it had not been for that letter last spring, who knows whether I would have set eyes upon her!" he had in those days rapturously exclaimed, referring to a message from the railway authorities to the engineer, with which he had been entrusted, and which for the first time had led him to the gaunt, isolated house at the end of the half-finished street. Having set eyes upon her he had come again so frequently, and at such short intervals, that Mariedl, succumbing to so many yards of ribbon and so many tinsel brooches, had before the end of a month promised an eternal faithfulness.

So far as Franz knew she had kept her promise pretty well throughout the summer, but lately there had been grave grounds for suspecting the perfect singleness of her affections, and more especially since a certain extremely smart hussar corporal had been seen to haunt the deserted street, having apparently, with the proverbial instinct of hussars in these matters, succeeded in scenting the treasure hidden in this unlikely spot.

"And when I question her she only laughs!" groaned Franz, "and pretends not to understand. And yet I know he comes to the house—I have seen him, and who else could he be after except my Mariedl, seeing that she's the only pretty girl within the four walls? Oh, Herr Hort, I know what it is—I know what it is quite well—it's just what you told us in summer; she's gone mad after the uniform, in the way you told us that the women are apt to do—and some fine day she'll turn her back upon me and go off arm in arm with her hussar. It was only yesterday she was taunting me with having no hair on my lip yet—*he*, that ruiner of girls, has got a moustache as black as the devil's tail, and as thick, too. But I'm not quite the baby they take me for; before he gets his desire I'll break his great stupid head for him—yes, I'll break it, in spite of his sword! Let me but catch him at it!"

"You have my best wishes in the enterprise," said Hort with somewhat distant sympathy, for he had lately heard rather more about Mariedl and her doings than he felt any desire to. "But meanwhile, I don't quite see how standing here and talking can further your object. I have work to do, my good fellow, and should be very much obliged if you would leave me alone."

"I'm going, Master, I'm going; I only wanted to ease myself a little. But let me but catch him at it—that's all I say!"

And with his two big, boyish fists suggestively clinched, Franz made for the door.

Hort got up to light the lamp—the same tin lamp which had illuminated his first interview with Millar, and not burning any brighter for having another year's work behind its rickety and ill-cared-for person. Outside a sort of daylight still lingered, but thanks to the snowflakes which the wind drove straight against the window-panes, to stick there in white blotches, it was no longer possible to work without a lamp. This work, too, required care and precision, being a technical drawing destined to figure in a competition from which Hort hoped to secure fresh employment, for engineers in Germany are even more plentiful than engineering jobs, and since the completion of the newest local line Hort had been living on his meagre savings.

But his desire to get on with the drawing was not the only reason of his somewhat curt dismissal of his erstwhile favourite Franz. That reference to the summer and to some of the things which had been spoken in the shadow of the railway embankment, had, curiously enough, not been to his taste. Not that he would have willingly unsaid any of those words—that would be to imply that his convictions had moved, and he knew that they had not—but that they brought with them an unpleasant recollection.

From the moment that the first whisper touching the true cause of the accidents at the manœuvres had begun to run—and of course it ran, despite censure and police—Hort had guessed—no, he had known, where those shots had come from. For a few days consternation pure and simple had possession of him. Never, in his most impassioned harangues against the order of the world, had he foreseen such a result as this. His deep and rather paradoxical antipathy to physical violence of any sort, in any shape, turned him almost sick at the thought of the blood which his words had caused to flow; for that this thing was his doing, that the blood had flowed, indirectly, at his command, of this he felt no reasonable doubt. He had only to think of that last afternoon before the manœuvres to recall the sombre, attentive faces turned upon him, as he spoke, in order to feel the certainty. Even although he could not quite remember what he had said, he had kept the recollection of those sinister glances—a reflection, no doubt of his own—and knew that the words which kindled them could have been no light ones. For the first time he realised that during all this summer he had virtually been preaching vulgar murder, he, whose fundamental principle had always been the elimination of violence.

The shock of the discovery sufficed for a little time to disarrange the current of his ideas. He was conscious of no upsetting of principles—what was bad before could not become good now, simply because something else was also proved to be bad. The ends which he had always had before him were still before him, but for the first time he paused to ask himself whether he were indeed pursuing the right road towards them. His hatred of the supreme uniform was not lessened by one whit, but he could not but recognise that this was not the way to get rid of it. So long as murderers were about the timid would continue to cry out for the necessity of armed protection. His mistake had been to overlook the innate brutality of uneducated human nature—he saw that now. But the right way must be somewhere; he had been vaguely puzzling over it since then. Everything within him, the aspirations, the impatience, even the indignation, had received a momentary check; it was a period of mental stagnation which must inevitably pass, and from which he might emerge either with his face turned towards another road, or else might start anew along the same track as hitherto, and with an even more impetuous step, his scruples brushed from him by the hardening process of a surprise got over, an experience that has been weathered.

Meanwhile the recollections of the summer remained irksome, and had helped to make Franz Knopf's presence irksome to-night, just as though his boyish chatter touched upon a sore point. How far the personal element entered into the soreness he preferred not to examine. Certainly, if anything was wanting to increase the irony of the situation, it was to be found in the fact that those unlawful bullets had been the direct cause of hurrying on the event which he would gladly have given his life to avert. Certain remarks let fall by Millar could leave no doubt on the subject. The reflection was one certainly not calculated to reconcile him to the working methods of such disciples as, for instance, Giacomo Alesta.

The tin lamp was lit at last, and Hort again at his table. But before he had been at work for two minutes he raised his head impatiently. Another knock at the door—was he to have no peace at all this evening?

In answer to his ungracious "Who is there?" the knock was repeated, a little more peremptorily. With a muttered oath Hort rose and opened, to find himself confronted by a tall, cloaked figure, of which a mere strip of face was visible between the cap and the high, turned-up collar, and on whose shoulders unmelted snowflakes clung.

"Does Herr Hort live here?" asked an unknown voice, a little indistinctly, because of the collar.

"Have you business with him?"

"I have."

Without waiting for a further invitation, the visitor made a quick step into the room, removing his snow-laden cap as he did so and turning down his collar.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, with a grave simplicity which sat singularly well upon the big man;—"Lieutenant Pletze, of the 20th Dragoons."

Hort, without knowing it, had made a step backwards. It was very much as though he had received a slap right in the middle of his face. In the gloom of the doorway he had done no more than dimly divine a uniform—that alone was astonishment enough—but what was it to the shock of finding that the man now standing in his own room, having quietly closed the door behind him, was the one man of all others whom to avoid he would gladly have walked a mile barefoot upon sharp stones,—the one man in the whole world whom he was absolutely sure of hating. What preposterous chance had led him hither? Had he come for the sole purpose of parading his triumph? of gloating over a rival's defeat?

There passed a minute while the lieutenant brushed the snow somewhat over-carefully from his cap, and during which the instincts of the natural and of the cultured man struggled wildly behind Hort's imperfectly composed countenance. The former could see only the enemy, the rival standing in his path, and cried out for instant avengement, for violence, yes, for blood if need be; while the latter shrank fearfully from the discourtesy of so much as a rough word to the guest who, of his own free will, had stepped across his threshold.

"What can I serve you with?" he asked coldly after that pause.

"I shall not trouble you long. I have not come for myself, but on behalf of Fräulein Elsner, to whom I am engaged to be married, and with whom I believe you are acquainted."

Hort nodded silently, turning a little pale, unable to imagine what was coming.

"She is very young as you know—quite a child; and it seems that she is rather troubled in her mind about a note which she once wrote to you, thanking you for a book which you had been kind enough to lend her. Her mother did not know about it, it appears, and she is so much of a child that she imagines —quite groundlessly, of course—that disagreeables might come of it. I have therefore promised, in order to put her mind at rest, to bring her back that note—if you have it still"—he added with elaborate carelessness.

He had told his story lightly, almost smilingly, studiously ignoring any possibility of a serious interpretation of an incident which he had evidently made up his mind to treat as of no consequence. And difficult though it was to him not to look the person he was speaking to straight in the eyes, he had somehow managed to avoid letting his gaze dwell too persistently either upon the strained face before him or upon the poverty-marked details of the dreary little apartment, never drearier than in this undecided mixture of lamplight and daylight—the one duskily yellow, the other as depressingly grey as though the face of the departing day had remained inquisitively glued to the curtainless window.

It was not a long speech, yet Hort, as he listened, had time to live through more emotions than belong to an ordinary hour. He was far too sensitive not quickly to have pierced the motive of that over-accentuated lightness of tone, and not to have understood the delicacy of those awkwardly averted glances, which seemed so anxious to see nothing either of the disturbance on the face before him or of the gaps in the cover of the ginger-coloured sofa. To acknowledge that he was at all moved by those observations would have been a little too absurd, but he had made them—that was bad enough, and although he knew it not, another reflection was complicating his sensations just now. Although in one sense he was this man's victim, in another and more material one the man had very nearly become his victim. Let the bullet but have gone but the fraction of an inch straighter to its mark, and for the rest of his life, though suspected by no one, he would have known himself to be a murderer. He was thinking of this now as he looked into the officer's face and marked there the traces of recent suffering, barely overcome. A little of that youthful ruddiness, a little of that triumphant vigour which Hort had kept in memory ever since the only other time when he had seen him near, was wiped away for the moment. No doubt she loved him all the better for it—and at the mere thought of the pity now added to the love, he felt the hardness settling back upon him. What was this man asking of him? That he should give back the note, the one poor favour she had ever granted him? Did he take him for an imbecile? Why should he yield up his only weapon of revenge? The thought of it disturbed her, did it? So much the better; he had never thought of making use of it in any way, but it held more possibilities than he had supposed. If by its means he could spoil her happiness—and this man's—ever so little, then it was more precious even than he had held it.

"She is so much of a child that she imagines—quite groundlessly, of course—that disagreeables might come of it."

As Pletze said it something abruptly readjusted itself within Hort's moral self. "Why, quite groundlessly? Because he takes for granted that I'm not a blackguard," was the immediate inner answer, and together with it came the vision of those humblypleading eyes which she had lifted to him on the last day they had been together, and when also he had tried a turn at the game of disturbing her peace.

"Bah—he is right!" he said to himself in a moment of inner reaction against the contemplated baseness. "She is no more than a child, and child-torture is not fair play."

"Yes, I have got it still," he said after what had not seemed to the lieutenant to be a very long pause.

Going back to his table he unlocked a drawer, placing himself so that his visitor could not observe the contents, among which various scraps of ribbon and one or two faded flowers—relics of which Thekla herself did not suspect the existence—led a jealously-guarded existence. For the second time this evening he was experiencing how heavily the instincts of a gentleman are apt to hamper the actions of a man.

"Here," he said, returning, and with a nonchalance as well played as though he were not tearing a page out of the book of his life, he held out the folded note.

"Thank you," said the lieutenant, as simply as the other had spoken, and then, without having quite meant to do it, he put out his hand.

Considering the size of the very substantial member, it was almost impossible to pretend not to see it; yet Hort, struck apparently with momentary blindness, looked straight past it. He did not want to take this man's hand, but whether it was because he was going to be Thekla Elsner's husband, or whether he himself had so very nearly become his murderer, he could not at that moment have defined.

The lieutenant was already at the door when Hort, in his turn, did something which was to him at least as inexplicable as had been the officer's impulsive gesture.

"You have been ill, have you not?" he asked abruptly, and rather ungraciously, just as Pletze turned the handle, "I mean since the manœuvres?"

"Yes, I have been ill," said the lieutenant, standing still in the doorway, "a fall from my horse—nothing serious."

"And you are sure of quite recovering your health?"

"Oh, dear me, yes—quite."

He stood looking at the engineer for a moment, evidently more surprised than pleased at the question; then, seeing that nothing more was coming, bowed again and went out.

"They'll succeed in barbarising him in time, no doubt," was the reflection with which several minutes later Hort went back to his work. "But they haven't quite done it yet."

If Giacomo Alesta, who in his more confidential moments was apt to tell his friends that Signor Hort's head was all right, but that his heart was too soft ever to make a good revolutionary, could have heard the remark, it is probable that he would have found himself strengthened in his opinion.

Downstairs in the dark entrance Franz Knopf waited with quivering muscles and boiling blood. He could not say how long he had been there; it seemed to him that it must have been at least an hour ago that he had seen that cloaked figure go up the staircase—up and up, as far as the third storey—ah, he had made sure of that. Would he never come down again? Oh, Mariedl, Mariedl! if blood were shed to-day, on the very eve of the Holy Evening, then on thy silky-brown head let it be!

The step at last! the ringing step of a spurred foot, which he had waited for so long! There was no lamp on the landing, but, by the dregs of daylight coming in through the open door, Franz could distinguish the long cloak, and the tall collar being turned up in preparation for the blast outside. And how gaily he stepped, how unconcernedly, this black-hearted, black-moustachioed seducer of girls.

The spurred foot had scarcely left the lowest step of the staircase when, tingling in every nerve, blind with jealous rage, Franz pounced out of his dark corner, and, with all the strength of his young arm, dealt the supposed hussar so tremendous a cuff on the side of his head that for a moment he himself reeled in the recoil of the blow.

Before he had quite recovered, he found himself staring into a pair of eyes that in this moment were not even angry, only supremely startled, and in close proximity to a moustache that instead of being coal-black, as it should have been, was, even in this half-light, to be distinguished as fair.

"Heiliger Himmel!" said Franz aloud, just before adopting what seemed to him the only solution of the situation, that is, taking to his heels; for the discovery that he had boxed the wrong man's ears had sufficed to transform bloodthirstiness into abject alarm.

All down the length of the deserted street he ran at the top of his speed, with the snow flying in his eyes and closely pursued by ringing footsteps—as a man runs who suspects a murderer at his heels, or like a thief flying from justice—so much like a thief, that when he had turned the corner of the next and quite as deserted street, a passer-by, startled by the sight of this figure flying through the dark, raised the instinctive cry: "Stop thief!"

As though in answer to it, the omnipresent German policeman seemed to start from the pavement, straight across Franz Knopf's road, to whom in his extremity—for the spurred footsteps had turned the corner too, ominously near—he appeared to be not a policeman but a sort of guardian angel, and to have come not from the pavement but from the skies. Partly because of his terror, and partly because he could not stop himself, it was straight into these official arms that he ran, and only just in time, for the avenger had all but touched him.

"Halt!" said the helmeted guardian angel to the pursuer. One word only, but enough. At the sound of it the bare, raised sword dropped as though struck down by a blow, yet not without a protest.

"Leave him to me, policeman! You must leave him to me—I have been insulted!" panted Pletze, with all the breath which the wild run had left him.

The organ of peace peered through the double veil of falling dusk and falling snow, and saluted, but did not flinch.

"I beg your pardon, Herr lieutenant, this man is under arrest; I cannot allow him to be touched. If you have a complaint against him, you can bring it forward at the police-station, where I am going to take him to have his most suspicious conduct investigated."

"But it must be now—now!" almost shouted the lieutenant, whose eyes were rolling, and whose bare sword was still in his hand.

"What does he want to do to the poor fellow?" asked another of the passers-by; standing still, and abruptly, Pletze realised that he had become the centre of one of those groups which even the least-frequented streets seem able to furnish whenever anything in the shape of a brawl is to be witnessed.

"To cut him in pieces, probably," jeered some anti-military element in the group. "Look how his teeth are chattering in his head!"

"Poor boy!" the murmur arose, and more than one vindictive glance was turned upon the sword, still gleaming naked through the thickening shadows.

"Your name, lieutenant, if you please?" asked the policeman, unmoved by any considerations lying outside the routine of duty.

"Lieutenant Pletze, of the 20th Dragoons."

He had said the words almost automatically, in instinctive obedience to what was a legal demand, but, having pronounced them, he would have taken them back if he could. Not that that could alter anything now, as he grimly told himself, but that another shade of publicity was added to the unfortunate incident. It was getting too public already, as the increasing size of the group around him proclaimed. To escape, to disappear, to avoid all further notice was the one thing which his instinct pointed out to him, not as a means of moral salvation for himself—confusedly and yet infallibly he knew that he was lost—but as the only hope of shielding his uniform from further insult.

Rapidly sheathing his sword, with fingers that still shook with excitement, Pletze strode from the spot, his pulses hammering, his mind full of a deep, yet scarcely articulate despair.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Next evening, under the brilliantly-lighted Christmas tree, Pletze laid the recovered note in Thekla's hand, and read the smiling gratitude in her eyes—but not with the joyful sensations which he had anticipated.

A terrible day lay behind him, and a still more terrible night—a night which he had spent in his clothes, and on his feet, mentally grappling with this new and startling situation. A hundred times in memory he had gone over those ten bewildering minutes in the dark yesterday, in the endeavour to find a point at which he might have acted otherwise than he had done; to discover some one preventable circumstance about the episode.

It had all passed with such inconceivable swiftness. The peaceful light-hearted descent of the staircase, with the ominous note safely stowed in his pocket—then the dark landing, and the sudden assault breaking straight in upon blissful anticipations of the little scene to come under the Christmas tree. Momentarily stunned by the force of the blow, it had taken him a minute even to understand what had happened. Having understood it he was conscious of only one thought—the one that leaps to the mind of every wearer of the German uniform who feels himself as much as rudely touched—his sword.

But the sword was under the cloak and the cloak was fastened; long before he had got it in his grasp the man had fled, and again the heavy, clinging cloak had been in his way, impeding him at every step of the pursuit which had ended abruptly before the policeman's "Halt!"

Oh, the agonised eagerness of that chase with a hundred wild thoughts in the background of his mind, but only one standing out distinctly before his consciousness—"If I do not reach him I am lost!" Then the pain of failing breath and the added stab of the reflection: "I cannot run as I used to—if it had not been for that bullet I would have got him."

It was one of those brief spaces into which Life amuses itself to pack half the emotions it has at its command.

Could he have acted differently? Without rest his mind was forced to return to the question, only to feel more plainly each time the absolute helplessness of the human atom, of whom Fate has chosen to make a plaything. Openly to resist an organ of the law had seemed, even in the height of his excitement, impossible to his notions of discipline. It seemed so to him still, although he knew that had that policeman been only ten yards further off—just far enough to allow the avenging sword to draw only one drop of blood—the whole incident would, for him personally, have lost its critical significance. It had wanted but that to wipe out the insult, which, under the actual circumstances, was not wiped out, and could not be, according to the army code of honour, by any amount of subsequent bloodshed.

For one wild moment he had asked himself whether oblivion might not serve the same purpose—but that had been before he had time to think clearly. Even though the policeman might not have heard his name aright, or had forgotten it, and even although not another word should ever transpire touching what was, after all, an extremely trivial incident, this could make no vital difference. Though no other mortal should ever know the truth, he knew it himself; and to stand among his comrades with this knowledge, would be to stand among them as a traitor. Even the ignominious ache on the side of his head, where the thickness of his hair mercifully masked an undeniable bump, told him that the thing was impossible—and more plainly still the moral smart of that unreturned blow, to which the physical was as nothing. Long before daylight had come he had resolved upon what seemed to him the only possible course of action. From whatever point of view he examined the matter he could see no hope anywhere—and yet, because the circumstances were so exceptional and so extraordinary, because he could not recall any exactly similar case, on the model of which to draw the consequences—but principally because he was young and wanted to be happy, he managed in some manner, inexplicable to himself, to keep hold during that long awful night of some feeble thread of hope.

He did not lose hold of it entirely even after his interview with Colonel von Grunewalde, which took place as early on the following forenoon as regulations allowed.

When he had told his story plainly and shortly, though with a black cloud before his eyes, and with lips that all his strength of will would not keep steady, there was one brief moment in which he felt almost happy. A load had dropped from his soul. At least the secrecy was done with, the humiliating consciousness which had been choking him all night. He was quite sure now of not being capable of hiding the stain which he had indeed not deserved, but which, nevertheless, he had incurred. It was a moment of respite, but it passed like a rent in clouds that part only to close again. During the short silence that followed upon his statement he was fighting another battle. In the long watches of the night he had settled even the words in which he would tender his request for dismissal from the army—since to forestall the inevitable would surely be less ignominious than to wait until it broke in upon him—but now that the moment had come the words refused to be spoken. In that anxious pause the image of a girl's face pushed itself between him and what he recognised as his duty. The terror of having his request granted on the spot, of having to meet Thekla that evening under the Christmas tree as another man already—a man without a uniform and without a profession—kept him silent. If it had been any other day of all the year but just this one he would have spoken—he knew it; but the desire to remain himself for this one beautiful evening was too strong for him. It would be time enough to do the thing to-morrow, if it had to be done; and although in his innermost heart he knew that there was nothing to hope for, he yet held his breath as he gazed into his colonel's face, as though to spell out there his verdict.

Von Grunewalde had listened with his gaze fixed hard upon the opposite wall, and occupied, apparently, in endeavouring to chew his grey moustache to pulp. Upon his skin-and-bone countenance irritation and distress were written large. The thing most capable of upsetting his clockwork equanimity was the faintest breath of scandal passing ever so lightly over the 20th Dragoons. With all the strength of his narrow but immovable soul he loved his regiment, and, despite the disappointment he owed him, he liked this young man—all the more reason for turning furiously upon him if he had got both himself and the regiment into a mess.

"In the name of all that is preposterous, what makes you visit out-of-the-way houses after dark, I should like to know? And—if you have to do so—you have your sword, have you not? Could you not have got at it a little quicker?"

"I suppose I could if I had been warned in time," said Pletze, with the unconscious irony of hopelessness; "but my collar was turned up, and the cloak was terribly in my way. It was altogether a question of about half a minute."

"Enough," said the colonel after another interval, during which he had put a few brief questions, and speaking now with forced quiet, "I do not require to hear more just now. You have done what was your duty. When I have made the necessary enquiries, I shall send for you again; you had better keep yourself in readiness."

There was nothing to do but to salute and retire, and after that to wait. He was waiting still even under the Christmas tree, with that glimmer of hope still faintly discernible somewhere on his horizon, but with a presentiment that was stronger than it, and which he could not lose sight of even in Thekla's presence, and which dimmed for him both the radiance of her eyes and of hundreds of lighted candles in the fir-branches overhead, fastened there so joyfully only yesterday. He shrank from throwing a shadow upon the gaiety of the family feast, yet despite his efforts Thekla questioned him, and the task of smiling away her anxious enquiries as to whether anything had happened, added another torture to the mental sufferings of the past twenty-four hours.

The expected summons next day was almost a relief.

Colonel von Grunewalde having, as on the first occasion, sent out his adjutant, received the young officer alone in his office. Just at first he said no word, but with an even more wooden face than usual, pushed towards him an official-looking document, from whose phrasing Pletze learnt that the police authorities desired to be informed concerning an assault made on December 23rd, by a certain Franz Knopf upon Lieutenant Pletze.

" The idiot has confessed, too," said the colonel with a twitch of irritation passing over his masklike face, and fingering the while an open newspaper beside him. "It seems that he took you for a hussar corporal who is courting some kitchen-maid or other, whom he means to marry. He is quite ready, apparently, to tear out all his hair in his desperation at the mistake," and von Grunewalde laughed a dry and singularly joyless laugh; "as if that could do any good now! Read this," and taking the police document from Pletze's nerveless fingers, he handed him the paper he had been fidgetting with for the last minute, and on whose open page Pletze read as heading of a leading article:—

"Peace on earth to men of goodwill!"

With a rapidity of which he had not known himself capable his eyes flew down the lines, taking in their sense by intuition rather than by comprehension. No name was mentioned, but neither was any required to let him recognise himself in the dragoon lieutenant who, according to the words of this radical organ, "had been stopped barely in time from desecrating the peace of the feast of peace by staining the stones of our pavement with such another blood-bath as the one whose shuddering recollection is still fresh in our memories. So long as such excesses are permitted," wound up the inspired leader, "the angels in the skies may sing themselves hoarse, without being able to bestow peace upon men either of good or of bad will!"

Very softly Pletze laid back the paper on the table. A sudden sense of quiet had settled down upon him. This, at least, made everything quite clear. He was aware of the colonel's eye fixed upon him with a certain dumb enquiry, a certain furtive anxiety of which he knew the exact cause and extent, and his one care in this moment was to say the decisive word before—

directly or indirectly—it were suggested to him. Never had he looked his superior straighter in the face than as he said:—

"I understand perfectly. Will you please accept my request for the permission to lay down my title of officer? My written application shall be handed in immediately." He seemed to be suffocating as he added: "It will be better so for the regiment."

The change upon the colonel's wooden countenance might possibly have appeared almost comical to a bystander—had there been one; to Pletze the transformation from anxiety to relief appeared so natural that it scarcely even wounded him. The old soldier was evidently fighting with a very real emotion as, before speaking, he put out his bony hand.

"Very well," he said a little indistinctly. "It is what I expected of you. Of course it is better for the regiment—incomparably better—and for you the end must have been the same, since no court of honour could have acquiesced in your keeping your place in the army. You have fallen a victim to a ridiculous combination of circumstances, and if the assurance of my personal esteem can be any comfort to you, allow me to give it you here."

The dumb and vigorous handshake that followed made many things good between those two men.

It was as well that Pletze had nothing more to say, since at that moment he would most certainly have had no voice to say it in.

He had thought that surely this would have been the worst moment, but he was mistaken. There were worse moments to come in the course of this brilliantly frosty Christmas day, during which almost every half-hour brought some comrade to his door, fresh from the news of his misfortune, overflowing with sincerest sympathy, burning with indignation against the fate which had taken the shape of Franz Knopf, but one and all bowing before the inevitable. Upon all their faces, however, disturbed by the emotions of friendship, even in those eyes in which the glitter of a frank tear of fellow-feeling was to be discerned, Pletze read the same rapture of gratitude of which he had seen the reflection upon Colonel von Grunewalde's countenance; gratitude for having spared the regiment the disagreeable *éclat* of a court of honour, always so detrimental to its reputation, for having gone forward to meet that fate which could not have failed to overtake him. In their delight at having escaped the odium of publicity, of seeing the honour of the regiment shielded from the vulgar gaze, and in their relief at being spared the terrible duty of pronouncing his verdict, even those who had not been his special intimates grew warm towards him. They could not tire in extolling the perfect correctness of his bearing under the blow of the catastrophe; they were ready to praise him, to cajole him, to make the most of him in every possible way—so long only as he ceased to be one of them, and took himself and his unfortunate box-on-the-ear as quietly as possible out of the glorious ranks of the 20th Dragoons. For this one day Pletze seemed to have become the spoilt child of the regiment which, while sincerely relieved to be rid of him, was as sincerely proud of his attitude—the only one which was worthy of one of "them."

Down to the youngest lieutenant among them there was not one who did not feel personally—though perhaps unconsciously—flattered by this new proof of how upright stood the traditions of the regiment they were so proud to belong to. It was hard, but of course it could not be otherwise—such was the tenor of their most effusive speeches. Not a word through it all which even distantly implied that any other course would have been compatible with self-esteem—such as it was understood in the 20th Dragoons. Pletze, as he listened to them, knew that what, during twenty-four hours, he had mistaken for a shimmer of hope, had been nothing but a shimmer of madness.

When the last of them was gone, he sank down heavily onto the nearest chair. Until now he had kept up bravely, saved, no doubt, by the habit of discipline. But now that there were no more eyes to watch him, why keep up the unbearable strain? The intentions of all those impetuous comforters had been excellent, but they had succeeded only in fixing his depression; all their good-natured chatter, all that inundation of sympathy, had served to make him realise more distinctly what it was that he had lost. As he sat there with his head in his hands slowly rocking his big body from side to side, with that craving after mechanical movement of some sort in which alone certain phases of emotion seem to find relief—he had a sensation that was almost physical, that of everything slipping away from him, as tangibly as any material object can slip through one's fingers—everything that had made life glorious and good; the past as well as the future, his memories as well as his hopes, his comrades as well as his occupation, his very place in the world—all, all was gone or on the point of going.

All? He did not yet raise his head, but the mechanical movement stopped. Through the black of enclosing shadows a ray of light, coming as though from some golden, resplendent star, and piercing to the very bottom of his despair, had suddenly shone. Thekla! How could everything be lost, so long as she lived and loved him? A momentary warmth stole over his poor, chilled heart. It glowed for a brief space, deliciously, then almost imperceptibly faded, touched by the chill of a new question:—

"But how will she bear this?"

Again he sat still, plunged in intense, furiously working thought. Suddenly he rose and began to look about wildly for his cap. It had come over him that he could not pass the night without having the answer to that question. He would go to her now, at once, and would tell her the worst. If there was consolation for him anywhere it could only be in the assurance of her unaltered love.

He found his cap and stretched out for his sword, but in the very act of touching it his hand fell to his side. *Was* it his sword any longer? By what title could he still belt it round him? Would not any of his comrades he met in the street have the right to order him to give it up? He stood for a moment in deep thought, then leaving both sword and cap untouched, began to pace heavily about the little room. At least he would wait until it was dark. It was too late to-day to procure himself other clothes, but darkness must serve him for once more.

In another hour darkness had come, but still found him pacing between the four walls—from the window to the stove, from the stove back again to the window—as though driven with whips. He could have gone out now, without much fear of being recognised, but he no longer thought of going. By dint of walking about and of thinking he had come to the conclusion that the announcement he had to make would be more fitly made by writing. Of Thekla's love he could not doubt, but he did not feel strong enough yet to witness her consternation, to read in her eyes the inevitable disappointment, which of course the poor child would not be able to conceal. Also, in this long hour of reflection, another possibility had occurred to him—that of the parents' probable opposition to the marriage. This seemed so evident that he only wondered at not having seen it at once. Were they even bound to keep their given word under present circumstances? Pletze himself could not see that they were. The real root of Elsner's almost reverential esteem for his person had long been clear to him; doubtless he would put pressure upon his daughter. Very likely there was a struggle preparing, and all at once it seemed to him that to act without the father's knowledge, to take her resolution by assault, as it were, in virtue perhaps of an excess of pity, would not be fair play.

"It is the father who shall know first," he said, aloud, standing still before his writing-table. "And to her I will not go—unless she calls me."

Nevertheless his face was not all gloom as he sat down without further delay to write the note he had resolved on; for in his heart he was saying:—

"She will call me!"

CHAPTER XIX.

In the Elsner house that evening, under the shadow of the now half dismantled Christmas tree, consternation reigned supreme. The note, which a little after dark had been brought to the house, had briefly but very clearly put Herr Elsner in possession of the chief facts of the case, explaining the encounter on the 23rd, and signalling the impending dismissal from the army.

"Under these circumstances," wrote Pletze, in a language whose formality betrayed nothing of the inner rebellion in which the words had been penned, "I, of course, recognise that I have no longer the right to insist on the fulfilment of the promise made to me by your daughter. My military career is at an end, and as it would take me many years to qualify for another it comes to this, that I have nothing to offer her in return for what she brings me. As a man of honour I feel that I have no choice but to give her back her word—should she so desire it. I await your decision and hers.—Conrad Pletze."

He had written "Lieutenant" after the signature, and again blotted it out with an almost savage stroke of the pen.

With this note in his hand, Elsner had made a precipitate entry to the drawing-room, and, regardless of Thekla's presence, had flung it down before his wife.

That had been ten minutes ago, and still the discussion, too agitated and incoherent to be dignified by the name of family council, had not got beyond the first stage of helpless and hopeless perplexity. Herr Elsner's original impulse had been to go off straight in quest of a verbal explanation, but the instinctive prudence of the business man had quickly intervened. Why add the awkwardness of a personal interview to an already precarious situation?

"Forced to quit the army! Forced to quit the army!" he had repeated some twenty times already and in every imaginable tone, as though he were experimenting on the sound of the words. And just as Pletze himself had sought relief in motion, so now was Elsner walking aimlessly about the room, at the risk of upsetting every chair that stood in his way, and heedlessly brushing his shoulder against the wide-spread branches of the Christmas tree, to the grave detriment of his coat, whose decent blackness was sadly disfigured by the adhesive snowflakes.

"That means, of course, that he is no longer an officer; but what is he, then—what is he, if he is not an officer?"

Elsner looked with angry enquiry from his wife to his daughter, and back again to his wife, as though peremptorily demanding an explanation, which Frau Elsner, at least, was not in a fit state to give. Her pocket-handkerchief was her usual refuge in moments of emotion, and she had been sobbing behind it now for some minutes, capable only of murmuring in accents that seemed to have been shaken up in a sack: "Poor young man! Poor young man!"

Thekla was not crying, and had not spoken. Very white and quiet she sat there with her handkerchief twisted to a cord and laid tightly round her knees, nothing about her moving except her eyes, which, wide and affrighted as they readily became under the influence of surprise, followed her father about the room as closely as though she were afraid of losing sight of him.

"What on earth has he been doing to be forced to quit the army? All this story he tells me about an assault—a stupid mistake, he calls it—is an easy explanation, but how do I know if it's the right one? It's just as likely that he's been simply dismissed!"

"I'm sure he's not done anything bad," gasped out Frau Elsner in the fulness of her swelling heart.

"He's done something stupid, then; a man does not get dismissed from the army with as little reason as a footman gets dismissed from his service. Supposing he did get a box-on-the-ear that was not meant for him, could he not have kept quiet about it, instead of making all this fuss? It can only be his own fault, after all—yes, it can certainly only be his own fault!" repeated Elsner, with a tenacity intended to convince himself. It would simplify matters so extremely if he could convince himself that the unfortunate young man deserved his fate.

"His career is at an end—he says it himself," resumed Elsner after another minute, during which he had made another round of the big room, followed by the sound of his wife's gentle sobs, and by Thekla's affrighted eyes. Before the big mirror he stood still —under the impression, perhaps, that he was looking out of a window, and, with his hands behind his back, drew a deep, agitated breath.

"It is a mercy, at any rate, that he has the decency to acknowledge the position."

As he said it he caught sight of his own face in the glass, and was alarmed by its look. It could only be because for the first time in his life he had entirely lost sight of that *just milieu* which it was his habit to maintain, even in moments of emotion, that that face opposite seemed almost like the face of a stranger. Then, realising that this was a looking-glass and not a window, he looked beyond, and saw Thekla still sitting in the same attitude with the handkerchief twisted round her knees. A sudden curiosity as to the effect of his last words upon her had come over him, and apparently over her mother, too, for Frau Elsner, emerging behind her handkerchief, was gazing at her daughter with tearful enquiry; but in those panic-stricken eyes—the alarmed, almost empty eyes of a frightened child—there was nothing yet to be read. Turning away from the mirror, Elsner resumed his walk about the room, more slowly and deliberately, as having realised the necessity of at least a semblance of self-control.

"Forced to quit the army! What will he do now, I wonder? He says himself that it will take him years to qualify for another career. What can he possibly do now?"

For the first time since the beginning of the discussion Thekla moved perceptibly.

"Why should he do anything?" she asked, and with the words a flame leaped to her cheek and a spark to her eye. "Have I not got money enough for us both?"

"He will not be base enough to take your money, now that you can no longer be his wife."

"Papa!"

The word rang through the room, as Thekla rose impetuously to her feet.

"Is that what you think? Is that what you take me for? That I should drop him just when he is unhappy, just when he needs me most? No, no—I shall never do that! Never!"

She looked exactly as she had looked on the day when she had insisted on being taken to the wounded lieutenant—drawn to her full height, as it seemed to be her instinct in moments like this, as though the better to bring to bear the whole force of her beauty upon the obstacle before her—superb and dazzling as she became in these rare times, when the mildness of her face was touched with passion.

"You are mad, Thekla!" ejaculated Elsner, standing still before her, astonished at her beauty, but far more incensed by her words.

"Quiet yourself, my child!" murmured Frau Elsner, to whose ease-loving soul even the shadow of a conflict was fraught with terrors.

With a convulsive effort at calmness, Elsner spoke again.

"You don't know what you are saying, Thekla. You don't seem to understand that the situation is entirely changed—he says so himself. The Lieutenant Pletze to whom I promised your hand does not exist any longer—there is only a Herr Pletze. He is not a lieutenant now, he is nothing at all."

"He is the same man who loves me, and whom I love," said Thekla, with an obstinate uplifting of her magnificent head. "No, mamma—I cannot quiet myself, not while I hear such things said about him. *You* must understand surely; tell papa, explain to him that one cannot change one's feelings so quickly, just like a pair of gloves—and because of an accident, which was not even his fault—ah, why don't you tell him? Don't you understand?"

"I understand—ah, yes, I understand," faltered Frau Elsner, a little shamefacedly; "of course, you will suffer—it is a terrible ending; but what your father says is true—everything is changed."

Although it was an exceedingly soft heart, it was, after all, but a very small soul which dwelt in that big, handsome body. Yet she had the grace to redden under the gaze of reproachful astonishment which Thekla turned upon her, as though she were saying: "You, too, mamma?"

"It is no end at all, I tell you, since I am not going to take back the word he offers me. If we were both poor it might be different, but since I am rich——"

"You are not rich yet, foolish child!" said Elsner, making towards her a step that was almost a threat. "My money is my own yet, to do what I like with, and if you imagine that I am going to put it into the hands of a man who has made so lamentable a failure of his life, a man who is only not expelled from the army because he prefers to forestall his fate—to whose name a certain degree of disgrace, whether deserved or undeserved, will always remain attached——"

"Stop, papa, stop! I am engaged to him!" cried Thekla, pale to the lips with indignation, an indignation that was not for herself, but only for him. That distant threat of disinheritance had scarcely moved her—her nerves were far too highly strung just then to let her even fully grasp the import of the words; and, besides, what could money mean to one who had never known its want?

"You are not engaged to him, since without my consent you cannot marry him, and that you shall never have."

Elsner himself had pains in recognising either the words or the voice as his own. With such absence of hesitation, with so entire a disregard of all qualifying admissions, he could not remember having ever spoken. Even the least bellicose of mortals has within him some citadel of strength, some point round which all the firmness of which he is capable rallies in moments of crisis, and with Elsner this point was his innate respect for the decent conventions of a social system whose fundamental principle is the division of society into clearly marked classes. If he spoke now with a voice which would brook no contradiction and with the gestures of a domestic tyrant, it was because he saw this point threatened. His daughter, his only daughter, married to a man whom his own class had branded, who therefore belonged to no class at all, who could no longer be classified by respectable conventional rules! It was the terror of this prospect which had caused the threat to spring to his lips, which might even go the length of supporting him in its execution. The very abjectness of his respect for the uniform helped now to feed his terror. To marry a man who was not an officer might be no especial glory, but to marry a man who had been found unworthy of the distinction—a social and military fiasco—it was too much for his fanatically respectable soul! Take away his uniform from him, and what remained of this young man, who possessed neither money nor nobility of birth—whose future, which had looked so brilliant but yesterday. had become suddenly quite hopelessly obscure? Herr Elsner could not see that anything remained; and, in words that were far from carefully chosen, he flung his conviction at Thekla, irritated by her strange obduracy to a point which made of the next five minutes a period of helpless anguish to his trembling wife, whose vain attempts to interfere between father and daughter were listened to by neither.

When at length—alarmed perhaps by his own excitement—he left the two women alone, it was with the same threat upon his lips, which for minutes past had been met only by Thekla's childishly mutinous silence, in which was no sign of yielding.

"My child—ah, how dreadful!" moaned the mother, dropping her hands to her knees as the door fell noisily shut. "My heart bleeds for you both—yet you must see yourself that there is no help for it. I have never known your father like that before!"

Thekla turned upon her with a peremptory gesture.

"Be quiet, mamma! You must help me, now; I have no time to lose."

"But what are you going to do?"

"To write to him; to tell him to come here—to-morrow, when papa is at the manufactory. I cannot live another day without assuring him that I belong to him for ever."

Frau Elsner lost a little of her superabundant colour.

"But, Thekla—your father will kill me!"

"No, he will not; he need not know. You must see, surely, that I have to speak to him, at least once. I must know what he is going to do. If you will not let him come here, I shall meet him elsewhere—I shall find a way—I know I shall!"

The conviction that she would find a way ended, after another few minutes, by bearing down Frau Elsner's resistance. To forbid one interview would be almost unmerciful—she felt that herself; and—who knows?—perhaps this young man himself might end by refusing to accept the sacrifice proposed.

Thekla had gone to her own room already, and, with fingers that jerked with excitement, was scrawling a few lines on a card. She could not rest until she had done something, not only to quiet his anxiety, but also to prove to herself that her parents' ideas were not her own, that she had no part in those words which had been spoken within the last half-hour, and at whose memory her cheeks still tingled with indignation. There had been too much naked human egoism, too much of the cynicism of social self-preservation for her inexperienced child's soul, with its generous instincts, to be able to witness unmoved. Every fibre that was noble in her nature had risen in revolt at the baseness of this desertion, while all that was soft and womanly cried out in pity for the victim of Fate.

It was the reaction from this tumultuous and humiliating half-hour which put into the words with which she called her lover to her side an ardour which was new to herself.

CHAPTER XX.

"WHAT can he be waiting for still?" Thekla asked herself every few minutes during the long hours of the following forenoon, which dragged on without bringing the expected response to her note. Each one of them added to the strain which the almost sleepless night—in itself an unprecedented experience—had laid upon her. Her heart was so full of yearning and of pity that until it had unburdened itself of its load no degree of peace was to be hoped for. Was it not a little ungracious of him to tarry so long, when she was doing so much for him?—for in the long hours of the night it had come to her that to defy her father for his sake was by no means a little thing; and, though she did it gladly, she would have liked to see it acknowledged. And, besides, the time was beginning to press, since in half an hour more Herr Elsner might be expected back to dinner.

She was just making the remark to her mother when a maid came in with a card upon a salver. Thekla snatched it up, frowned at it for a moment, and, throwing it down again, went hurriedly to the door. The frown had been called forth by the observation that the word "Lieutenant" had been carefully erased upon the calling-card. At the door she turned back towards the maid:—

"Did you take him into the little drawing-room, as I told you?"

"Yes—the Herr Lieutenant—that is, the gentleman is in the little room."

Thekla frowned at the correction, just as she had done at the card. There was a curious look of astonishment on the girl's face, which both displeased and disquieted her.

Half way down the staircase she was rejoined by her breathless mother.

"Not so fast, Thekla! You know that I only consented on condition that my presence— One cannot throw all rules overboard, after all."

"Very well," said Thekla indifferently, and without moderating her pace. Her mother was far in her wake as she traversed the big drawing-room towards the boudoir beyond; but in the act of opening the door her impetuous haste seemed to have received a sudden check. Shutting it again quickly, she came back towards her mother with a face of astonishment and confusion.

"That stupid girl! It is not Conrad at all—it is a strange man in a brown coat whom she has taken in there."

Frau Elsner gave a perplexed stare at the card she still held in her hand.

"How can it be? His name is quite plain here."

"Go and see for yourself, if you will not believe me," said Thekla, with a touch ill-temper. "I tell you it is a stranger."

"You saw his face?"

"No, only his back; he was looking out of the window; but Conrad never——"

She broke off, as though struck by a sudden idea—an alarming idea, to judge from the gaze she turned upon her mother.

"Go and see, mamma—go and see!" she urged, almost pushing her mother forward. "Perhaps it is a visitor for you."

A moment later Frau Elsner, standing in the open doorway of the boudoir, was uttering a curious mixture of exclamations.

"But, Thekla—dear me, how strange! What a funny mistake to make! Yes, of course it is the Herr Lieutenant—I mean——"

And in another moment later Thekla, almost running forward, and having assured herself by a swift, piercing look at his face that this was indeed her Conrad, found herself suddenly enclosed in a pair of arms clad in an unfamiliar brown material, but the impetuosity of whose gesture was familiar enough. With her head resting against this same unfamiliar brown coat she at length burst into tears—the first she had shed since the terrible news of last night.

Until now the bare excitement of events had reigned too supreme to leave room for mere repining; it was in this moment, with her lover's arms about her, and with the tangible proof of the change which had happened since yesterday brought so unmistakably home, that she became in one instant aware, not only of his loss, but also of her own. Convulsively she sobbed, her face pressed against his shoulder, her eyes as tightly shut as though she were afraid of what she might see if she opened them; while her mother, alarmed by this abandonment of grief, protested helplessly, and Pletze struggled to find the calmness that was necessary to calm her.

"Thekla—Thekla—your eyes, I implore of you—your eyes! Your father will guess everything when he sees them so swollen!" urged the desperate Frau Elsner, while Pletze murmured only:—

"My love—my love! It is too much for you—I knew it would be too much!"

But already Thekla was making an effort. No words could have better spurred her out of this unlooked-for access of discouragement, reminding her, as they did, that this was not at all the way in which, during the long watches of the night, she had seen herself welcoming her lover, with words of hope and of encouragement on her lips, with a fortitude that was to support him, and, above all, with the instant assurance of her unaltered fidelity—that was how it was to have been. It was only these stupid clothes which, taking her so entirely by surprise, had upset her equanimity, and with it her calculations. Somehow she had not been prepared for this, or at least not so quickly, so entirely without warning. Too much for her? No—she must prove to him at once that it was not too much for that spirit of self-sacrifice which since last night she had discovered within herself and which she was determined to live up to.

Under the impulse of the resolve her head raised itself from his shoulder, and through her tears she smiled at him as she had never smiled before.

"Oh no, Conrad—oh no! You don't know how strong I am; you don't know all that I am ready to do. It is only the surprise; and then, I had waited so long, I thought you were not coming at all."

"I could not be here sooner; I was as quick as I could be; I had to procure things, you know—these clothes, I mean—since I cannot wear the uniform any longer."

"Never again?" she asked, with lips which, in spite of all her efforts, visibly quivered.

"Of course never again, since I am no longer an officer."

"Are you very unhappy, Conrad?"

"I cannot be quite unhappy while you love me, my goddess!"

They were standing in the middle of the crowded boudoir, holding each other by their two hands, as though the better to make sure of each other's presence, and they were as good as alone, since Frau Elsner, in whom the terror of being surprised by her husband had triumphed over her sense of propriety, was playing sentinel in the big drawing-room outside. From time to time a sob shook Thekla's breast, but forcibly she kept it down, blinking her eyelids fast, so as to prevent the tears rising. With her eyes fixed hard upon his face, with her ears drinking in the passion of his words, she was doing all that lay with her to keep strong, as strong as she had felt last night, when she had so recklessly confronted her father—to feel the exaltation which had sustained her so successfully then. It was easier to do it when she looked only at his face—that at least was not changed except for the anguish upon it, and she looked at it as hard and persistently as though she wanted to prove to herself that this was indeed the same man whom she had loved for a year, the thought of becoming whose wife had filled her with such exultant pride. Without knowing it, she avoided looking at anything beyond his face, for that would have been to look at his clothes, and his clothes were what she did not want to see, since they reminded her too painfully of what he had once been and was no longer. The trivial cynicism of the proverb which declares that it is the clothes that make the man had always been wont to raise her indignation; it came into her mind now, only to be angrily cast aside, but not without leaving its shameful little mark behind it. In his blue coat with its glittering buttons, with spurs on his heels and the sword by his side, her hero had always seemed to her so resplendent that she had never even thought of analysing his precise claims to good looks, nor was she calm enough now to disentangle the grounds of the vague sense of disappointment with which his appearance filled her. A man who has known but one mode of attire, whose every detail is rigidly prescribed, does not learn overnight to make a proper choice, in the matter of either material or cut, among the bewildering variety of garments which such a place as Mannstadt offers to the mixed tastes of its inhabitants; and, although Thekla did not reflect as consecutively as this, she felt rather than saw that his coat—bought ready-made, no doubt, at the first shop he had encountered—sat badly upon him (how could it be otherwise, seeing that ready-made garments are furnished only in normal sizes, young giants not being generally taken into account?)—that his cheap-looking cravat was neither of the right pattern nor fastened in the right way; just as she was aware, without wanting to be so, that the very freedom of his movements, and consequently his whole bearing—once so proud and so fearless—had suffered from his change of attire. And not his bearing alone. Gazing at his face now with that yearning intensity which wanted to keep hold of the image of her hero as she had known him, she wondered how she had never before noticed how heavy was the moulding of the chin. Could it be the shape of the collar alone which gave to the throat—more fully displayed than she had ever seen it—this unexpected look of breadth as well as of roughness? The questions did no more than shoot through her mind, chased by the emotions which his words, his glances, the pressure of his fingers, and now the hurry of farewell, were awakening in her; for already the sentinel had appeared in the doorway with warning words upon her agitated lips.

"It wants but ten minutes to twelve: he will be here immediately, and Thekla must absolutely bathe her eyes before he sees her."

One more clinging embrace, and the brief interview was at an end, without any definite explanation having been come to. Assurances had been given, protestations made, kisses exchanged, but nothing like a plan of action discussed. That must stand over till next time—for that there would have to be a next time was clear, even to Frau Elsner. A hurried consultation decided that whenever the opportunity for an undisturbed talk seemed favourable a summons should call him.

Having left the house—by a back door, at Frau Elsner's especial request—Pletze did not immediately turn back to his lodging, but, having stood for a moment in deep thought, set off walking briskly in another direction. Although in his dread of recognition he kept his hat—a soft felt hat that was a size too small for him—pulled low over his forehead, a little of the very deepest shadows was lifted from his face. Those few minutes in the boudoir had been like a draught of the elixir of life. With Thekla's promises still ringing in his ears, with Thekla's kisses still burning on his lips, it was impossible quite to despair. Not even her tears had been able to bring back the utter hopelessness of yesterday. He had seen in them only what he had wanted to see in them: the unavoidable distress of her tenderly sympathetic heart, at most a very natural and explicable disappointment. Her courageous resolve had elated him far more than that little moment of weakness had been able to depress him, and had given back to him the power of looking the future in the face.

With quickened mental energy an idea had leapt to his mind, almost in the moment that he stepped into the street, and it was on this idea that he was now acting.

Millar, returning presently from the manufactory, was astonished to find what appeared to him a stranger waiting for him in his lodging. It was only when the big man in the brown coat began to speak that, incredulously recognising Pletze, he burst into an irresistible laugh.

"My dear friend! Is this a mystification? If so, it's an uncommonly successful one. To be sure it's Carnival time—I presume you are masquerading?"

Pletze stared blankly for a moment, before appearing to understand.

"I forgot that you don't know," he stammered; and then, with dark flushes passing over his haggard-looking face, he told his story.

It was a story which, but for a certain conversation he had once had with General Russel, Millar would not have believed, and which even with that conversation in his memory was hard to listen to with any degree of calmness. Long since his sense of justice had rebelled against the theory of army laws, and to see this theory put into practice upon the person of a man for whom he had got to feel warmly within the last year was enough to determine a final revolt of the spirit. It could not be like this—it could not—there must be a remedy somewhere.

And yet it was like that, and neither was there any remedy anywhere, as the victim of these same laws himself now proceeded to explain.

"Some cases are harder than others, of course; but there can be no exceptions; that was always quite clear to me—it cannot stop being clear to me just because it is my own case."

"Then you are going to do nothing? To appeal to nobody?"

"There is nothing I can do. You don't seem quite to understand." Pletze actually smiled—a pale-looking smile, but unmistakably a smile of faint amusement at the ignorance of this outsider. "The only thing I could appeal to would be a Court of Honour. Beyond that there is nothing; its verdict is final—and that verdict I have only anticipated by taking my dismissal."

"It is monstrous! monstrous!" ejaculated Millar, who looked just now by far the more excited of the two.

"It is not monstrous," said Pletze, almost angrily: "it has to be so—I see that even now. My comrades know as well as you do that I have done nothing dishonourable, but they cannot put out of the world the fact that an officer has received a cuff on the head, and a cuff on the head is a thing which does not accord with the dignity of the uniform. Even the most elaborate explanations will not prevent there remaining a certain number of people who will go on believing that when a man gets his ears boxed it is because he deserves to have them boxed; and such an impression, even though it be a false impression, cannot help injuring the high name of the army. Military honour, you see, is a far more brittle article than civil honour, and has to be handled far more carefully. The colonel himself called it a ridiculous combination of circumstances; but since they have combined there is nothing more to be said."

Millar, gazing intently into the earnest face before him, did not know whether he felt more inclined to laugh or to cry. Was this a farce or a tragedy? Was this young man to be hooted at for his abject acquiescence in what seemed a mere eccentricity of Fate, or to be admired for the spirit of martyrdom which, even while falling, could still applaud the justice of the blow under which he succumbed; whose one consolation in laying down the uniform seemed to be the thought that by the sacrifice of his own person he was vindicating the integrity of a sacred institution?

And, at the same time that he was thinking all this, Millar, just like Thekla, was trying to reconstruct from the badly dressed, awkwardly moving civilian before him the brilliant young officer he had known so lately; nor was he succeeding much better than Thekla. Divested of his uniform and the *prestige* it brought with it, there remained of his visitor just what he had at first perceived on entering the room: a big man in a brown coat that was too small for him, who certainly held himself rather straighter than does the average civilian, but who, with no sword-hilt to feel for, evidently did not quite know what to do with his hands, and whose features scarcely ranged above the commonplace. It was when his eye fell on the cravat that the half-nervous laugh which had been threatening for some minutes broke out at last.

"Do you know, it's almost funny!" he said, rising from his chair rather precipitately, in order to be rid of that look on the face before him.

"Not to me."

The tone took Millar's thoughts straight back to a talk he had had with this same young man only a few months ago. "You see, I have never known anything else," he had then said. Well, he would have to learn to know something else now, it would seem.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, all the more brusquely because of the pang of almost intolerable compassion which the recollection brought with it.

"That is what I was thinking of consulting you about. I came here for that. The war in South Africa is not quite finished yet—do you think there would be any chance of my getting a place in the English army? Since I have myself laid down my commission here, they would probably not think me disqualified."

"Very likely not," said Millar, avoiding the anxious gaze; "but the mere fact of being a foreigner disqualifies you, you see. Even within the ranks we take nothing but subjects of the Empire."

Pletze's face fell by another degree.

"That is a pity. The Boers would take me, of course, though I would rather have been on the English side; but I fear that is not the right way to assure my future—and my future has to be assured, for the sake of Thekla."

Millar turned with a movement of surprise.

"Do you mean that Fräulein Elsner——"

"Our engagement subsists the same as ever," explained Pletze, with an unconscious uplifting of his head. "Her father refuses to recognise it—he even speaks of disinheritance; but Thekla has declared that she will wait, either until he relents, or until she is old enough to marry without his consent."

"She has declared this?"

The astonishment in the voice somehow jarred upon Pletze.

"Yes," he said sharply, "those were her very words. I have just come from her."

"Extraordinary!" said Millar to himself, since aloud he did not venture to say it. He could not himself have explained why the news of Thekla's splendid fortitude had astonished him so much. Undoubtedly she looked like a queen, but somehow he had expected her to act more like a child.

"I should have liked best, of course, to have got into some sort of uniform," Pletze was saying; "but I must not think of myself alone—I have to lay the foundations of a household. Your time here is almost up, I believe; perhaps when you go back to England you might find something for me; and I must go out of the country, at any rate—I could never make up my mind to stay here now."

He paused for a moment, twisting his hat, which he had convulsively kept hold of, round and round in his hands, an occupation in the course of which, as Millar observed, the grey kid gloves into which he had obviously struggled with difficulty had begun to crack at the seams.

"You see, it would be too unbearable," he went on in a hurry; "I could not help seeing soldiers at every turn, and hearing signals and the tramp of horses, and everything that belongs to it; I should feel near to it all the time, and yet irreparably parted; for, however kindly disposed my late comrades may be, they will no longer, they can no longer, speak to me in exactly the same tone as heretofore. I am a marked man, you see. The mere sight of their compassionate sympathy will be a constant rubbing against the sore spot.

The rest I can bear, perhaps, but not that. That is why I want to get away—to England or America—better to America, since it is further. Perhaps you can help me? I am quite willing to work."

"What sort of work can you possibly do?" asked Millar, with the unconscious scorn of the professional worker for the man who, in his eyes, has done no more than fill a place.

"Anything for the beginning—something that has to do with horses would do best. I think I could be a very fair riding-master, or I would gladly undertake to break horses—any of my comrades will tell you that I am a first-rate hand at that; or I could take charge of racing stables—anything, in fact, to begin with, just till I have time to look about me and make a plan. Do you think you will be able to help me?"

"Perhaps I can; you must give me time to think."

Yielding to an impulse of curiosity, Millar added:—

"And Fräulein Elsner has consented to separate herself from her country and from all her people?"

"We have not spoken of that yet; there was no time; but since she loves me enough to throw in her fate with mine, of course she will go where I go."

"I have made a mistake about that girl, evidently," was the reflection with which a few minutes later Millar found himself alone; "I would not have thought it of her—no, I would not!"

He was experiencing that agreeable sense of surprise which accompanies the discovery in our neighbour of some quality or virtue with which we had not credited him.

CHAPTER XXI.

The great press ball had come round again; but although Herr Elsner was donning his tail-coat downstairs, Thekla and her mother, instead of making any preparations for the evening, were carefully stowing away the radiant toilets which earlier in the day had been laid out in state—a gorgeous mauve brocade for Frau Elsner, a wonderful pink crape for Thekla—and laying back into their cases the various ornaments displayed upon the dressing-table; for although Thekla had from the first rejected the idea of the ball, it had been found more prudent to acquiesce, at least in appearance, in Herr Elsner's peremptorily expressed desire on the subject. By this time, of course, Pletze's disgrace was public, and it by no means suited the incensed manufacturer that Thekla's absence from so conspicuous a feast should be construed in the manner in which it was likely to be construed.

"What is the use of irritating your father further, when the pretext of a sudden headache will serve your end just as well?" had been Frau Elsner's argument; and Thekla had acquiesced, having by this time recovered her senses quite sufficiently to see that she would be gaining nothing by open opposition in minor points. She made no objection even when Frau Elsner, much pleased with her own diplomacy, had the ball-dresses laid ready, in the full view of Elsner, who, confronted by such elaborate preparations, could, despite his lively annoyance, scarcely doubt the genuineness of the headache which was announced to have come on just as the hairdresser was ushered in. And he would have done wrong to doubt; for, though convenient, the headache was perfectly real, as the unusual want of freshness about Thekla's skin and the heavy shadows round her eyes would alone have convinced him. Besides convincing, they also touched him a little, making his farewell words to her gentler than any he had spoken since that fateful evening, now four days back.

"Lie down, my child, and get some sleep; I see that you are not fit for a ball-room. It has been a trying time—for all of us—though I have no doubt that in the end your good sense will triumph."

He had kissed her, too, which he had not done since Tuesday, and that kiss had strangely moved Thekla, revealing to her how much she had missed the wonted paternal caresses. To a nature as carefully trained and as dutiful as hers, even the lightest disturbance of domestic peace must be painful, and this was no light disturbance. Undoubtedly it was much easier to live at peace with one's surroundings than at war—with smiling faces around one instead of frowning ones.

Left alone with her mother, Thekla did not lie down; there would have been no use in doing so, since that afternoon she had sent a note to Pletze, summoning him for the evening. The headache—real or pretended—was to serve another end beyond mere abstention from the ball. Before at the very least one hour after midnight, it was certain that Elsner would not return from a feast at which his business instinct alone made a prolonged appearance appear advisable. No better opportunity could be found for that undisturbed interview which the unfortunate man was, no doubt, impatiently awaiting. Thekla was waiting for it, too, but with almost as much anxiety—or was it dread?—mixed with the impatience. It was four days now since the terrible announcement, and four days—together with portions of the night—which are given exclusively to reflection are capable of maturing an extraordinary amount of thought, and consequently of bringing about all sorts of mental discoveries. If she could have kept hold of that purely nervous excitement which had sustained her so magnificently during that scene in the big drawing-room under the dismantled Christmas tree, then everything would have been easy; but, perhaps because of the exhaustion of those sleepless nights, she was no longer able to retain that sense of exaltation—even found it difficult to believe in its ever having been. In its place now stood a deep depression, born she could not exactly say in what moment, but which certainly had not been there before the first interview with her so curiously metamorphosed lover. With all her strength she had been struggling against it for three days, without being able to get the better of it or to rid herself of that half pathetic, half comical impression of his personal appearance which she had carried away with her from the boudoir. She was ready—of course she was ready to cling to her hero through adversity—how could three days have changed anything about that? —but she must first get used to him in this new shape, must convince her inner consciousness that this really *was* her hero, and not a mere travesty of his person.

"I wonder if he has got any better clothes by this time?" she was asking herself even now, as she laid back into their cases the bracelets she was to have worn at the ball.

Frau Elsner, similarly occupied, could not quite repress an occasional sigh. This display of trinkets, of ribbons and of flounces, had been more deeply diplomatic than Thekla was aware of, since until the very last moment the mother had not quite abandoned the hope that the daughter, succumbing to so many glittering inducements, would, after all, consent to be taken to the ball. How much pleasanter that would have been than the painful interview which awaited them!

But on this point Thekla had never flinched. If she, too, in secret, shrank from the emotions of the interview, she dreaded far more intensely those that would have met her in the ball-room. Loyalty alone would have made her appearance on this festive occasion seem like a treachery towards Conrad, but it was not loyalty alone which had decided her refusal. The dread of showing herself in public just now had played almost as great a part—for it was as *his fiancée* that she would be looked at, as the affianced bride of the man of whose social downfall half the town was talking by this time—she knew it by the mere looks of the people she had met since Tuesday, she had heard it plainly from the lips of a girl-friend who only yesterday had invaded her privacy with the acknowledged object of proffering unwelcome condolence.

"You still mean to marry him?" this would-be comforter had almost gasped in her astonishment at the announcement which met her. "Well, you *are* brave, that is all I can say!"

The obvious sincerity of the tone had brought home to Thekla the exact depth of the downfall that awaited her, far better than all the parental indignation had been able to do. For this was no man of business who spoke here; this was a girl like herself, with ideas which she had always found to be rather similar to her own; similar also to her in this, that she too had for several months past been engaged to an officer.

"Why, we shall be in quite different classes of society, my dear! Herr Pletze has made no other studies than military ones, of course, so the occupation he is likely to find is not likely to be one which would make it easy for me, as an officer's wife"—(how proudly had not Thekla once said those same words)—"to associate with his wife. Do you realise that?"

She had not quite realised it, but she did so now, together with other things.

No, under present circumstances the press ball would have been too great a trial. And it was not from publicity alone that she shrank, it was also from the stirring up of memories, that were but a year old, which scarcely wanted the sight of the lighted ball-room and of the crowd of uniforms to fall upon her unmercifully. To think of the triumph and of the hopes of that unforgettable evening was to feel at her heart a mortal stab of regret, not so much for all the personal triumphs that she was renouncing, but for that position she had once coveted, for that dead *prestige* which had always in her eyes loomed so much larger than more material accessories.

Henceforward all this would have to cease to be for her. Even if her father should relent, all that social *éclat* would be gone for ever—and if he should not relent?

Within these last days Thekla had tried to face the question. "Well, you *are* brave!" her friend had repeated at parting; and Thekla herself rather leaned to that opinion. There was no doubt that she was doing—for Conrad's sake—something very brave, very big, and that seemed to be getting bigger with each day that she thought about it. Was Conrad thinking about it in the same degree? Did he quite understand, quite appreciate what she had undertaken? During the first interview already she had felt faintly astonished at his manner of speaking of her act of heroism—it surely could not be called less than that; she could not remember that he had even actually thanked her. He had wanted only to be assured of her love, and, having got the assurance, he had seemed to take the rest for granted. That had been her own point of view, the one she had opposed to her father, the one on which she still took her stand; but, although she protested herself ready for the sacrifice, she was beginning to feel curious and a little anxious as to the details of the process.

It was all in her mind now, circling round and round with wearisome persistence while she carefully shook out the pink crape skirt previous to hanging it in the press, in whose depth it would slumber for who knows how long?

All at once she gave a little, broken laugh.

"I don't really know why I am taking so much trouble with this dress; as Conrad's wife I shall never need any ball-dresses at all, since most likely nobody will invite us."

In her trouble Frau Elsner all but dropped the earrings she was laying back in their case.

"Oh, Thekla—how can you say such dreadful things! I don't believe people could be so cruel to you—and besides, you are not yet his wife, after all."

"But I shall be some day, I suppose, so surely I had better get used to the situation."

"There is no hurry about that, since, without your father's consent, you cannot marry before you are twenty-four. Six years is a long time, after all."

"Yes, six years is a long time," said Thekla, and she paused for a moment, as though she were taking a look at those six years before her, but was astonished to observe that they did not bear exclusively the character of a desert, but had about them some of the marks of a respite. Unless her father relented she could not, before those six years—be her spirit of self-sacrifice ever so great—accomplish her own immolation.

"Do you think that papa will change his mind in six years?" she asked, rather quickly.

"I don't know; I cannot well imagine it; and yet it seems still more impossible that he should cut himself off entirely from his only child."

Thekla shook out a fold of her dress rather impatiently. Her mother's answer was not the one she had expected. For some reason, obscure to herself, she wanted to be assured of the impossibility of her father ever yielding, although to herself the chances of his maintaining his present inexorable attitude for a whole row of years appeared almost as slight as they evidently did to her mother. Despite his actual inclemency she guessed her father not to be made of the stuff of those cruel fathers of the theatre who prefer to see their children dead at their feet than happy in their own way; and to whom, after all, should he leave the proceeds of the bicycles if not to his only daughter? But the consolation in this thought was but a poor one; it was not the money she regretted—the baseness of merely financial calculations had not yet had time to kill higher aspirations—those things that she regretted were of a less tangible nature, and could not be restored by her father's consent.

"But," said Frau Elsner, looking sideways and a little timidly towards her daughter—"it seems to me much more probable that you will change your mind."

"But, mamma—what an idea! What do you take me for? How could I break my promise?"

There was a great deal of annoyance in the tone, more, perhaps, than of indignation.

Frau Elsner sighed again heavily, allowing the light to play upon the diamond necklace she held in her hands.

"You don't know what you are giving up, Thekla, that is the truth."

"I know that I am giving up a great deal—everything that I really cared for till now, but if he finds it possible to accept the sacrifice I ought to find it possible to bring it."

"That is just it; how *can* he find it possible? Men are certainly much more selfish than women—no doubt about that; and can it be right to sacrifice one's whole life to a man's egoism?"

"Hush, hush, mamma!" said Thekla, as vehemently as though she was recoiling before the suggestion contained in her mother's words. "I could never be as base as that—never! I could never break the word I have given!"

"But you might have taken it back when he offered it you."

"That also would have been so weak—so—so commonplace."

Frau Elsner's big round eyes were still riveted on the diamonds.

"I'm sure I don't know whether I shall wear them this carnival. There can be no pleasure in taking you to balls while you are in this frame of mind. Oh, Thekla, just think what an evening we would have had if only you had found it possible to obey your father! That mauve brocade is simply a triumph!"

And she threw a wistful glance towards the magnificent garment on the bed.

"Oh, never mind about the ball—it's not that part I care about," said Thekla a little wearily, as though tired with the discussion.

"If only that young man does not appear too early," began Frau Elsner after a minute of anxious reflection. "It would be awful if he found your father still in the house. I have not heard the carriage yet; it will be best to go down and see him off."

She arrived just in time for the purpose, but did not breathe freely until the brougham had borne her lord and master from the door.

"Make Thekla lie down," had been his last injunction, and she had nodded meekly in reply, too conscious of her own duplicity to put the lie into words. How much longer would she have to keep up these pretences, so repugnant to her intrinsically sincere nature?

"If only there was a way of bringing it to an end somehow," she despondently reflected, still lingering in the entrance. "I shall never be able to keep it up —*Himmel!* is that he already?"

The door, which the footman had been on the point of closing, had been pushed open again to admit a tall figure in an overcoat.

"That was a terribly narrow shave," said Frau Elsner in a reproachful whisper, as he drew near.

"Not so narrow as you think; I was watching the door. I did not want to keep Thekla waiting this time; I can see her at once, can I not?" he asked in a tone whose urgency was reflected, tenfold, in his eyes.

"Yes, I will fetch her in a minute. Come this way," and she led the way down the passage, and into the same boudoir where the first interview had taken place, and where a lamp had been lit under a lemon-coloured shade.

"I will fetch Thekla in a minute," repeated Frau Elsner, but she did not yet turn to the door. She was contemplating Pletze, with all sorts of ideas in her mind, out of the jumble of which something like the hazy outline of a plan began at length to emerge.

"You must not stay too long," she began again after that minute; "and you must not agitate the poor child too much, she has quite enough to bear as it is. By rights, she ought to be in bed already—her head has been aching frightfully all the afternoon, and no wonder with the amount of tears she sheds."

Pletze looked frankly surprised. "Tears? But I thought I had dried them for her on Wednesday! She seemed so full of courage when we parted."

"Ah, yes—of course she did her best before you. Thekla has far too noble a spirit to let her break down in your presence. It is only I who witnessed the reaction from the effort. Poor child! Poor child! Why, you will see for yourself how changed she is in three days—it could not be otherwise with the little she has eaten since Tuesday—not enough to nourish a sparrow, I tell you!"

"This is very astonishing," said Pletze, in growing consternation.

"Astonishing? It can only be because you are a man that you find it astonishing; any woman would tell you that when a girl is called upon to give up everything—even to break with her own father——"

"I did not call upon her to do that; it was her own free choice."

Pletze still spoke in that same perplexed tone in which he had replied to Frau Elsner's first words.

"Because she is too noble, I tell you; but you must not think that she does not feel it. Only just now she was saying to me: 'I know that I am giving up a great deal, but if he finds it possible to accept the sacrifice I must find it possible to bring it.'"

"Please repeat those words," said Pletze in another and colder tone.

Frau Elsner repeated them—with a few additions. When she had done he remained lost in thought for a moment, and she, a little intimidated by the change upon his face, did not venture to speak again.

"You do not understand Thekla," he said at last, throwing back his head a little. "Please fetch her now, will you?"

"You will not agitate her?" began Frau Elsner, almost tearfully, but was peremptorily interrupted.

"Be so kind as to fetch her; you know that you promised to do so. And I will ask you also to give us a few minutes alone—it need not be more than a few minutes, but I must have those absolutely."

Frau Elsner looked into his face, and found herself murmuring: "Very well." The habit of command, its tone, its glance, is not always laid aside together with the uniform.

Left alone, Pletze remained standing where she had left him, staring at the yellow lamp-shade which shed so unpleasantly a lemon-coloured light upon everything within its circle. Almost five minutes passed before Thekla appeared, scarcely time enough to let him recover from the surprise he had just undergone; and it was a quite honest surprise, too, probably because he had made the mistake of measuring her love according to his own. He had seen her shrink that first time, but had explained it away to himself; he was still attempting to explain away all that he had just heard, and, although to hope had already become an effort, he was still hoping—principally because the blackness beyond was a little too black to be looked at just yet.

"I shall soon know," he said to himself more than once during those five minutes.

When she came in at last, with sad blue eyes and a tender smile upon her pale lips, hope, for one minute, leapt up anew; she could not look so sad, if she did not love him as he loved her. But with the renewal of hope there came a pang, that was at first purely of anxiety for her. Her mother had been right in saying that she was changed, though surely she was wrong concerning the causes of the change.

"I shall soon know," said Pletze to himself again, as on the blue plush sofa he sat with his arm around her, her head against his shoulder, resting there as though exhausted. She was altogether far quieter than she had been last time—perhaps because she was physically tired; there was neither the burst of grief nor the forcible reaction of that first meeting—nothing but a gentle depression which, even in Pletze's eyes, bore some resemblance to resignation.

Several minutes passed before he felt calm enough to make the announcement which he had come here to make, and which now suddenly presented itself to his mind in the light of an experiment—possibly a decisive one.

"Thekla," he presently began, having steadied his nerves by a moment's silence, "to repeat that we love each other is not enough. We must think of the future as well as of the present. Tell me: have you tried to think yet of the future?"

"Yes—a little," faltered Thekla, with an irrepressible shudder, which he felt plainly against his supporting arm.

"Have you realised that we shall have to part for a long time?"

"You mean that it will not do to continue your visits, so long as papa——"

"I mean much more than that. You know that I have to look out for a new profession, but it cannot be in this country. I could not bear to live with the army before my eyes—not belonging to it any longer. Therefore our home will have to be founded elsewhere."

"Where?" she asked, with the quickness of alarm.

"In America, I think. There are more openings there than anywhere else."

"As far away as that? Oh, Conrad!"

"It cannot be too far away for me."

"But for me! How long your letters will take to come!"

"We shall not be reduced to letters for ever, my love. Six years are long, but they will pass. I can live through them contentedly, if I know that you are coming to me."

"What? I shall have to go over there, too?" she asked precipitately, as though having only this moment grasped the whole of his meaning.

"If you become my wife you will have, of course, to follow me."

"So far away from everybody—from papa, from mamma—from everybody I have ever known! Oh, Conrad, do you mean that really?"

He had his arm still round her, but had drawn a little away from the close embrace, as though the better to be able to see her face. A strange coolness had all at once laid itself upon his agitation of a minute ago. He found himself looking at her carefully, almost critically, determined not to let any symptom escape him. Nor was there any need for a very close scrutiny; the naïve distress upon her face, come to the surface before even she had had time to consider the advisability of masking it, was written so large that he would have been blind indeed not to see it.

Something in his eyes seemed to strike her suddenly, making her perhaps realise the import of what she had just said, for it was with a little confusion that she went on speaking.

"Would it not be possible to find something—some profession, I mean, in another country—some place not quite so far away as America? Somewhere where mamma could visit us sometimes?"

"It would be possible to find a profession even in this country," said Pletze, very quietly. "People are disposed to be very kind to me; my late colonel has offered to procure me a situation as forester on the estate of a relative of his, if I can pass the necessary examination."

Again he could feel the tell-tale shudder against his arm; it was the word "forester," apparently, which had done it this time.

"No, no," she hastily protested, "that would not do; but in Austria, perhaps; they speak German there; I should not feel so utterly lost, you see, I don't know a word of English, Conrad, and even you would probably get homesick over there—do you not think so?"

She was smiling up at him now, rather tremulously, in the attempt to modify the impression of her unguarded words. But the effort of self-mastery was not so successful as last time, which was the reason why Conrad saw it better. In truth, he saw all sorts of things now which he had overlooked then, but to which those few minutes with Frau Elsner had successfully opened his eyes.

But he gave no sign. He even smiled back at her, though with a feeling like death at his heart; for now he believed at last that the end was come. It seemed strange now to himself that he should not have known this from the beginning. Given with both hands, as these things ought to be given, as he himself would have been capable of giving it, he could have taken the gift of her life; but not this way—not this way. Love had made him foolish; yet the first sign—not even of reluctance, but only of the presence of an afterthought,—was enough to leave the word to pride alone, the over-sensitive pride of the humiliated man who holds to it as to his last good.

It was very gently that he took leave of her at last, having given her no direct answer to her last question. Thekla herself, despite her relief, had wondered at the unexpected turning aside of the subject which they had scarcely begun to discuss, now dropped in favour of remarks of a soothingly general nature; but she wondered still more at the strange kiss he gave her when the moment of parting arrived—so much sooner than she had expected.

"I promised your mother not to keep you long," he said as he drew her once more towards him; "you are too tired to-night to let us discuss our plans, and it upsets you too much. I believe it will be best to do so by writing."

"Then you will write?"

"Yes, I will write," he said, and kissed her—a kiss that would not end, but with something in it of the sadness and the solemnity of a last farewell.

There was no anger in his mind as he stepped out again into the night, only the deep smart of wounded pride, and a little astonishment at himself.

"I suppose, after all, I must be considerably more of a fool than I took myself for," he mused as he went. "Now that I think of it quietly it does seem a little simple to suppose that any woman could love any man to that extent."

He had promised to write, and in the moment that he reached home he sat down to fulfil the promise.

"*My beloved Thekla!*—

"I am calling you so for the last time, to-day, since I am writing to ask your pardon for having been so blind and so presumptuous as to imagine that my poor person was worth the sacrifice of everything that makes life pleasant. These last four days have been a useless torture to you—I see that now—and a quite superfluous drawing-out of my own sufferings. My only excuse for having been ready to accept your sacrifice is that I was stupid enough not to recognise its extent, or even its exact nature. Your attempting to oppose your father's will is, of course, a preposterous idea—that ought from the first to have been evident to the meanest comprehension; but I have no doubt he will forgive you as readily as I forgive him any hard thoughts of me he may lately have harboured. They are entirely justified by my unaccountable stupidity.

"When you are by some happier man's side think of me sometimes, as I shall have no choice but to think of you, over there, in that new world which seems to you so far away, and to which there is no danger now of your ever being banished.

"Conrad Pletze."

Not all the sorrow in his heart had been able to keep the bitterness out of the last words he was ever to address to the woman he had believed in so implicitly.

It was too late to dispatch the note that night; and until close upon the following mid-day he waited in a suspense which was not the less real that he declined to acknowledge it to himself. Of what tough a texture was this man made that, even after yesterday, hope would not entirely die?

The writing on the envelope was Elsner's—he saw that at once. It contained a courteous acknowledgment of the communication to his daughter, and a set of carefully-measured phrases conveying a formal rupture of the engagement—in her name as well as in his own. What tears may possibly have flowed, what words of anguish may have been spoken between this morning and mid-day, before the result proclaimed upon this tidy sheet of paper had been reached, he would never know now, and scarcely even felt curious to know. All that occupied him was the question as to why she had not written herself. He would rather have had the proof of her renunciation in her own hand.

Half an hour later he had it, when a second note—despatched, no doubt, surreptitiously, and with a distinct tear-blotch on the address—was brought to him. No more than a scrawl this, with several more tear-blotches in the inside, written in evident distress, but not differing in essence from the large, tidy sheet. With a breaking heart she gave him up, with all the joy gone from her life, all the sun from her heaven—but still she gave him up, convinced at last that he was right, and that her first duty was towards her father.

It was a pathetic little note, but a good deal harder to bear than the formal phrases of the father, more difficult to live down even than had been the obtrusive sympathy of his comrades. Separated from them, love had still remained to him; but now that love itself spurned him, what was there still to live for? He had thought then already that his existence was broken, and he recognised that now as a mistake. It was in this moment only that everything was lost; it was only now that he was sounding the bottom of despair.

CHAPTER XXII.

The term of Millar's engagement at the manufactory had ended some days ago, yet his preparations for departure were being conducted in a somewhat desultory fashion. He was returning to his own country, whose interests alone he had had in mind when he accepted Herr Elsner's offer, and yet he was going back with no lighter heart than he had brought here with him. When he set out a year ago, he had seen himself returning armed to the teeth with proofs that only in one way was the salvation of the Empire to be reached, with a word in his mouth which was to ring through the length and breadth of the land. Now that the moment was come where were his proofs? Where the arguments that were to annihilate his adversaries? Where that beautiful enthusiasm which he had brought with him into his temporary exile? What had he seen that could convince him so immovably of the blessings of conscription? He had seen a populace groaning under the burden of the blood-tax, degraded by the details of its working; he had heard words of hatred and revenge, and witnessed the very handiwork of Anarchism itself; he had watched one class of society abjectly prostrating itself before another, had looked on indignantly at the tyranny of the Uniform, had felt himself shaken to the bottom of his soul by the sight of the latest victim immolated on the altar of army *prestige.* And having seen all this, was he going back to his country with the device "Conscription" still written on his banner? Assuredly not. At what precise moment his convictions had changed he could not say; it was only now, when looking over both the material and the mental baggage which he was taking home with him, that he discovered those erstwhile ideas lying on the ground, after the fashion of a building whose foundations have yielded to a slow mining process.

Conscription being put aside, what remained? General Russel's skeleton army? The idea had begun by appearing fantastic—and yet for some time past it was beginning to pursue him. As gradually and imperceptibly as his faith in conscription had palled, just so gradually and imperceptibly had the details of General Russel's plan been insinuating itself into his stubbornly-resisting mind. Look what way he would, of all the possible and impossible proposals bred by national alarm, this seemed to him on the whole the least impossible of them all.

Disappointment in his quest did not bear the whole responsibility for the slowness of Millar's preparations for departure. Now that the moment for packing up had actually come he was astonished to find that it was not quite easy to turn his back on Mannstadt. General Russel had once spoken of the irresistible nature of the military atmosphere, and Millar was discovering something of the truth of that remark. In this one year he had got so used to the martial sights, the well-disciplined bustle of a large garrison town, that he could not, without a certain blank feeling, think of what awaited him at home. He was going from a country in which the uniform is idolised to one in which it is good-humouredly smiled upon; from a place where it takes precedence even of grey hairs, to one where a man makes haste to get out of his parade dress for fear of the witticisms of the street urchin. If the one extreme was distasteful, was not the other rather pitiable? And would it not be difficult to get used to it again?

There were his friends, too—new friends, indeed, but from whom the parting would not in every case be quite easy. General Russel he might hope to see again in England some day, but that unfortunate Pletze he would probably never see again, nor that magnificent Thekla, whose image had grown so astonishingly in his mind since he knew of her resolve to share her lover's fate. And Hedwig?

Arrived at this point in his reflections Millar thoughtfully knocked the ashes off his cigar. Doubtless the parting from Hedwig would be the hardest parting of all. The thought that those friendly disputes in Colonel von Grunewalde's Spartan-like drawing-room were to come to an end for ever filled him with a sudden keen regret. Would she too regret? he asked himself with a little curiosity. He almost thought she would, even though he was a foreigner and did not wear a uniform; or, if not, then those bright brown eyes had surely lied to him. Yes, it would be a little lonely over there, even though it was his home, with nobody close at hand to whom the military question was as absorbing as to himself, and whom he need not fear to tire by ever-repeated discussion.

It was time, too, to be taking leave of them all. He would begin by Gustav Hort, whom he had not seen for some months; but a newer picture of whose handsome, morose face he nevertheless wished to carry away with him.

In the out-of-the-way house at the end of the unfinished street he found the engineer occupied with giving the final touches to the same drawing with which he had been busy on the day of Pletze's visit.

"So you have had enough of Mannstadt?" asked Hort, still pencil in hand.

"I cannot honestly say that I have, but since Mannstadt has had enough of me I have no choice but to go home."

"To preach your crusade?"

"Not the same crusade I once contemplated preaching."

"Ah?" The mockery on Hort's face gave way to curiosity. "Is it possible that you have discovered flaws in that ideal system?"

"I have. A system which maddens men to the point of murder—as we are all aware that it did last September—cannot be the right system."

"Ah?" said Hort again, but this time glanced aside and began nervously drawing lines on a scrap of paper before him. After a moment he asked, without looking up: "Have you seen him lately?—I mean since the catastrophe?"

"Have I seen whom?"

"Why, that young man, of course—Pletze. It was in leaving this house, you know, that he met his fate—a strange dispensation of Providence, surely!" and Hort laughed his harshest laugh.

"I have seen him," said Millar, to whom the connection of ideas between his last remark and Hort's abrupt question had not been immediately clear.

"How is he bearing it?"

"Wonderfully well, I think; another proof of what a woman's love can do even for a desperate man."

"Ah, yes; so long as he had that! But now that that too is gone, does he still find life possible? That is what I should like to know."

"But since it is not gone; it was scarcely a week ago that he told me that his engagement subsisted the same as ever."

"A week ago—I daresay! But a wonderful lot of things can happen in a week. It is evident that you have not seen him quite lately; but it is strange you should not have heard it through the Elsners."

"I have not been near the Elsners since I left the manufactory. You mean that she has given him up?"

"Yes, she has given him up," repeated Hort, drawing ever closer and blacker lines upon the paper before him.

"Where have you heard this?"

"From Elsner himself, two days ago in the street. If he had not been simply bursting with satisfaction he would scarcely have condescended to make the announcement to me, of all people. No doubt there have been family scenes, but paternal authority has come out triumphant in the end."

Millar, plunged in astonished reflection, said nothing. The news he had just heard had taken him almost as much aback as though it directly touched himself. So used had he already got to his new conception of Thekla, that it required an effort of mind to return to the old one. There was a positive disappointment to wrestle with, the natural reaction from that agreeable surprise of last week. "So I was right about her, after all," was the conclusion in his mind.

Hort, meanwhile, was speaking again, his eyes still fixed upon the paper he was scribbling full.

"It seems that she made an effort—a magnificent effort it probably was, like everything she ever does—but apparently she exhausted herself in it."

"Scarcely to be wondered at. Insignificance and poverty—it is a good deal to ask of any woman, is it not?"

"That depends upon the woman."

"Yes, and also upon what she is getting in return. If he had really been all the world to her, as I imagined——"

"As he imagined himself, poor fellow," put in Hort with the fragment of a laugh.

Millar looked at him in silence, secretly wondering. Ought not the news of Pletze's dismissal to be filling Pletze's rival with elation, if not exactly with hope? Yet in the engineer's words there was far more disapproval than pleasure, and in the tone in which he spoke of the woman once so hotly coveted, something that came very near to contempt. He could not know that the elation had been and was gone, having flickered up wildly in the first moment, to sink under the tide of that especial sort of indignation which cannot look on unmoved at an act of cowardice, even though that act be to the detriment of a natural enemy.

"She would have been a heroine if she had done what she meant to do," said Millar after a moment, still watching the other's face; "so her failure to do it does not prove against her anything more than that she is not a heroine."

"And does not know what love means," finished Hort, glancing up with a world of scorn in his dark eyes.

"I do believe he is cured!" thought Millar, meeting that glance.

And in the street again his mind returned to that surprise which was not a surprise, contained in this latest news, and which had disturbed him profoundly. If he walked on fast now it was not because he was in a hurry, but because he hoped to get away from the vision of Pletze's face as he had seen it last, and which since the moment of Hort's announcement had started up to pursue him. If it had been so near to despair then, what must it be now? Would the man so utterly abandoned find strength to go forth alone as an exile from his land, to begin a new life in a new world? "It was that which was keeping him up," thought Millar, as he remembered the proud movement with which Pletze had put up his head, in proclaiming Thekla's fidelity. But what was there to sustain him now?

With the aching compassion for the man grew the resentment towards the woman whose conduct he had made a feint of defending. He had been thinking of her as so magnificent, and she was after all so ordinary; she was doing so exactly what any average woman of good intentions, but without the strength of mind necessary to live up to them, might be expected to do. She had duped him by her splendid bearing, she had extracted from him an admiration which was not her due—enough to cause this feeling of almost personal grudge with which he thought of her now. Hedwig, who looked so much less splendid, would never have acted so despicably, he felt sure of that, even without seeing the proofs. Perhaps it was but the natural consequence of the recoil of sympathy from Thekla which sent his thoughts so straight to the only other woman he had seen frequently during the past year. That Hedwig interested and attracted him he had known for long, but had never until this moment discovered in what actual estimation he held her. Hedwig, as he guessed her to be, gained suddenly and immensely when compared to Thekla as she had revealed herself. It seemed that it had wanted but this in one moment to ripen desires which for months past had been moving obscurely in his mind.

“Is it impossible that she should make up her mind to go home with me?”

The thought seemed suddenly to stand before him, so distinctly and unmistakably, that for a moment his pace was checked. And immediately he knew that this it was which he had required all along, the want of which had been making departure so difficult. Over there, among his blue and grey-eyed countrywomen he would surely have missed the sparkle of those dark eyes whose frank gaze had met his own so often during the twelve months that were passed. With her by his side there could be no danger of his interest in the military question ever being starved to death; quite close to him there would always be somebody whom no discussion on the great subject could ever weary, with whom he could argue, or quarrel, if necessary, to his heart's content. Why, it would be almost like carrying a little bit of the German army itself home to English shores.

And his chances? Not so very bad it seemed to Millar. At any rate suspense would not be long. While he told himself so he had again mended his pace, but in another direction. He had turned towards the street in which Colonel von Grunewalde lodged, for his departure was too near to permit even the waste of an hour. If anyone had told him that he was going to make an offer of marriage to Hedwig because he was indignant with Thekla he would have laughed that person to scorn; and yet it was undeniable that Thekla had almost as much to do with his resolve as had Hedwig herself.

On the staircase he met Colonel von Grunewalde, in a great hurry it would seem, since he brushed past Millar without giving a sign. But Millar, too, was in a hurry which would brook no delay.

"Can you tell me whether your daughter is at home?" he asked, almost button-holing the evidently reluctant colonel.

"My daughter?"

It was only as he turned his sharp, narrow face towards him that Millar began to guess that the apparent failure of recognition had been intentional. Never since he had known this masklike countenance had he seen its wooden features disturbed by anything that looked like an ordinary human emotion. To-day, for the first time, it became quite clear to him that the wood was, after all, but flesh and blood, and that the thin lips which could close so tightly could also quiver, under the iron grey moustache, at the touch of some hidden pain.

"My daughter?"

He said the word again in a repetition that appeared stupid, and with a look of such haughty surprise in his cold eye that Millar wondered what he could have said amiss.

"Yes, she is at home; you will find her up there."

And, without waiting for another word, the colonel freed himself and passed on.

"If I know what a man looks like who has had a blow on the head," mused Millar as he pursued his upward way, "then that man has had such a blow; and a rattling good one, too."

In the big, bare drawing-room he found nobody, and waited some minutes after his card had been taken to Hedwig, looking about him regretfully, as one looks at familiar spots about to drop out of his life, and wondering the while, in somewhat desultory fashion, at the curious number of packages with which the table as well as the sofa was littered.

When she came in at last it was with a blue linen apron covering her dress, and with more packages in her hands. The little curls on her forehead were rougher than usual. But it was not these things which astonished Millar—it was something in her face—a new excitement which he had never seen there before, a ravishment which, it would seem, was mixed with a grief, for, although the swollen eyelids seemed to speak of tears shed, the eyes themselves were brimful of light.

"Don't scrutinise my appearance too closely," she laughed, having freed herself of her parcels, and stretching towards him a hand which was encased in an old uniform glove of her father's; "but I am terribly busy—making order in my things; it is fortunate that I have not many of them!"

"Too busy to give me five minutes?" asked Millar, keeping hold of the little hand in the big glove, and looking straight into her eyes.

"Oh, no, not that—more particularly as they will probably be the last five minutes I shall ever be able to give you. You are going away, are you not?"

"I am going away—but you?"

"Don't you see that I am packing up?"

"You are undertaking a journey? How fortunate for me that it has been delayed until now! I could not have left Mannstadt without speaking to you; there is something that I absolutely require to say to you."

"Really?" said Hedwig, gently drawing her hand from his, as she sat down opposite to him. "Then you had better say it quickly, for I am going away very soon and very far."

"Very far?"

"As far away as the other side of the ocean."

"Are you joking?" asked Millar a little impatiently, provoked by the smile which played about her lips.

"It is anything but a joke, I can assure you. I am really going away from Germany."

"Alone?"

"No, not alone."

Her eyes sank to the gloves, which she began very carefully to pull off her hands. For one second she seemed to be deliberating; then, a little hurriedly, she went on: "There is no reason to make a secret of what everybody will soon know: I am going to be married in a few days."

Millar could only gaze at her with the not very intelligent expression of extreme surprise. He did not ask: "To whom?" but Hedwig read the unspoken question in his eyes.

"To Herr Conrad Pletze," she completed, raising her head to speak the plain, deliberate words.

"Impossible!" said Millar, with tongue suddenly loosened. "Why, he——"

"Was engaged to someone else only a few days ago—that is what you want to say, is it not? But that engagement was broken—perhaps you know that—and the new one is only two days old."

"This is terribly quick," murmured Millar. At the end of a minute's bewildered reflection it was all he had found to say.

"It *is* quick, but it has to be quick if it is to be at all. I daresay it sounds to you impossible that a man should be engaged within the same week to two different girls; very likely he appears to you as a very pattern of fickleness; but you must not judge him from that—it would not be fair to him. It is not *his* doing, in very truth it is *mine*. You see, it was in this way."

She was speaking eagerly, with flaming cheeks, the momentary confusion of the first announcement swept aside by her anxiety to justify Pletze's conduct.

"To you I can speak openly—I know that you have always been a good friend. You will not judge either him or me falsely. When I heard that *she* had deserted him, that all his hopes were dead, my first thought was: 'He will not be able to live!' The fear of this thought laid hold of me and led me to him, as though I had been led with hands. He was so utterly alone, you see—how could I keep away? It seemed to me that I had no choice but to offer him my life—if that could help to save his."

"And he accepted your sacrifice?"

She turned her blazing eyes upon him.

"Sacrifice! It was no sacrifice; it was the consummation of the only desire I had ever had—that of standing by him in his need, of having the right to share his sorrows as well as his joys."

This time her eyes did not drop before Millar's nor did the voice shake in which she so fearlessly and so simply proclaimed her love.

"Well then—he accepted your gift?" he corrected his first question.

"He had no choice but to do so. I arranged things so that he could not refuse. It was by broad daylight that I went to his lodging, in the full view of every one who cared to look on. I wanted to make it impossible for him to say No. He could not well do so when my fair name was at stake, could he? Oh, we women find ways, when our will is set—be sure of that!" and she laughed a triumphant little laugh.

"You have a great deal of courage," said Millar with a touch of scorn, for the disappointment was still raw within him.

"And no sense of shame, some people will say, but not you, I think," and she looked at him steadily. "To me it was not a question of what people would think of me, but a question of getting to him before he had time to think of his revolver—and he had thought of it already—he acknowledged that to me. When a person is as unhappy as all that the usual rules cannot count, surely."

"You have a great deal of courage," said Millar again, but without the scorn, this time.

"I am only doing what I could not help doing, what I had no title to do until now. That time in autumn when he lay wounded, do you think that my heart did not drag me towards him? But I could not go to him then, because *she* went; and now that he is suffering from a much worse wound than any bullet could bring him, you want me to keep away from him?"

Her shining eyes seemed to be speaking the same reproachful question, as with nervous fingers she tormented the gloves she held in her hands.

"It was impossible either to let him die or to let him go away alone—over there to that chilly world beyond the sea. He does not love me yet—I know that quite well—he is only grateful; but I love him too well not to gain his love in time."

"You will have a rival in her memory."

A disdainful smile slipped over her face.

"I am not afraid of her memory, although she is as beautiful as a goddess. She never loved him at all—she was only in love with his uniform—can he think of such a love for long? Oh, I shall gain him, never fear—I shall certainly gain him in the end, though for the present I am satisfied with saving him. Even if I had nothing but my love I think I could have saved him, but I have a little money as well—what my mother left me; quite enough to make the beginning easy."

"And your father?" asked Millar, with a sudden recollection of the curiously altered face he had seen a few minutes ago.

Upon Hedwig's forehead there appeared those sharp lines of pain which graved themselves there whenever she drew her black eyebrows yet more aslant than nature had made them.

"Oh, you need not have spoken of that," she said much lower. "That is the one difficult thing. The total separation will come very near to breaking his heart, I know that quite well. We have been so much together, you see; of course his 'little adjutant' will leave a big hole in his life. And not only that but he had always hoped to have a soldier for a son-in-law, and this I think must be almost worse to him than somebody who had never worn a uniform; for though he esteems Conrad highly and pities him deeply he will never be able quite to forget that he is a military failure."

"And to you?" asked Millar, in whose mind the echo of so many words spoken in this same room seemed to be ringing confusedly.

She looked at him with again that same reproachful astonishment.

"But I have told you that I am only doing what I cannot help doing. The only hard part is my father; but even that part is quite clear, for, although he needs me, too, he needs me less than Conrad does, since he has still got that which Conrad has no longer got. It is Conrad who is the unhappiest of the two, and, therefore, it is to him that I go. My father can never be quite alone among his comrades, he can never be quite desolate with the joy of his profession. I believe he sees it himself, for he could prevent me if he wanted to, and he does not. Although my departure takes all the joy out of his life, he has said no word to persuade me to abandon Conrad, and I know that he will say none."

"Most decidedly I understand nothing about women," thought Millar, as he listened. Was not this the same girl whose horizon had once seemed to him so narrow, who had provoked him so often by the petty groove of her ideas?

"You are going?" asked Hedwig, as he stretched for his hat. "But you have told me nothing yet, and surely you began by saying——"

"No; I have nothing to tell you—it was a mistake. Only to take leave, and to wish you all happiness in your new life."

Hedwig stretched out her hand, smiling in frank unconsciousness of having been in the least cruel to this man who had never been more to her than a convenient instrument, lying too ready to her hand not to be made use of—perhaps too plunged in present joys and pains even to remember that she had ever so used him.

"Thank you; I know I shall be happy; and some day you will hear of him as happy—believe me! And you will hear of *her* as happy, too, since there are plenty of uniforms still in Germany, thank goodness!"

She laughed merrily, almost without bitterness.

"You are his friend, I think, as well as mine—well, then, depart in peace: your friend is in good hands—be sure of that!"

"I am sure of that," thought Millar on his homeward way. "In fact I am not quite clear in my mind even now as to whether that man is more fortunate or unfortunate, more to be pitied, or more to be envied!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"WHATEVER you do don't go to sleep again, and neither let them go to sleep again over there."

It was General Russel who said it, pacing the platform of the Mannstadt railway station, by the side of Millar, whose place was already retained in the train just now getting up its steam, and whose ticket reposed safely in the depth of his pocket.

"I cannot regard the dragging out of the South African muddle as an unmitigated evil. So long as we have to keep our pockets open for paying the cost of our want of foresight, so long will Army Reform be talked of—but after that—! Nothing but a continuous shaking by the shoulder, a continuous shouting—or, if necessary, bawling—in the ear, will keep John Bull awake to his own danger. A thousand things will conspire to rock him gently to sleep; tales of the heroism of his troops, examples of their marvellous endurance, the flattering opinions, exultantly cited, of some foreign military critic, who in all probability is an officer dropped out of a Continental army because of his inability to command a squadron, and now blooming forth, rather to his own surprise and to the vast amusement of his late comrades, as an unimpeachable authority. If you want to cry down all these voices you will have to shout pretty loud, but I fancy your lungs are good. Also I imagine that your skin is thick enough to resist the stones and the mud—among which the substantive 'alarmist' and the adjective 'hysterical' will of course figure largely—that are bound to be cast at you. Do not let yourself be pelted into silence, and do not let yourself be dazzled by the present rush of volunteers, to which your adversaries will triumphantly point. The ease of recruiting is an unavoidable phase of warfare, but an ephemeral one; it has never failed to show itself so long as war lay in the air, and it has never failed to die out so soon as peace re-entered into her full rights.

"And above all, try to make clear to people at home that a second such blow to our *prestige* might easily prove fatal; for not all the naïve self-congratulation of Englishmen among themselves, not even the proud words spoken by exultant ministers at public banquets can alter the fact that it *has* suffered, and grievously too; though perhaps more in the eyes of the general public than in those of the initiated. A *prestige* that is supported by centuries of tradition takes a good deal of wearing out, but these are fast-wearing days, and the signs that ours is growing threadbare are not wanting. If you wish to be convinced of this, go into any public resort on the Continent, enter a coffee-house or a tramcar, and if you keep your ears open for a few minutes, there are ten chances against one that presently you will hear one of the conversations around you turn upon South Africa, and always—even now that nobody seriously doubts the issue—with the invariable refrain: 'England has made a fool of herself!' British self-complacency is hard to pierce, and yet there must exist means of bringing home to it the fact that—whether rightly or wrongly—we have within the past fifteen months furnished Europe with an exceedingly serviceable laughing-stock—nor does it seriously affect the question whether it be rightly or wrongly, for no amount of true light turned upon the situation will ever quite do away with a certain sense of ridicule. 'All envy,' you will say; and it is envy, but no envy speaks so loud as that unless it thinks to see the day of retaliation ahead. We, who know more than the foreign public knows, know that we have suffered from misrepresentation almost as much as from Boer bullets; but you will never get the great mass of the people to analyse each separate incident and recognise the justification which is generally forthcoming. To them the spectacle of the British Empire defied for a year and more by the Boer Republic will always remain an incongruously absurd one—the duel of the Lion with the Mouse, and a duel in which the Mouse has actually kept the Lion at bay. Nobody seriously expected the Mouse to win, but it is bad enough for the Lion's reputation that one stroke of its paw was not sufficient to finish up so ridiculously small a foe. Here again we who know, know that the task was in reality a much bigger one than it appears at a distance, but is it not because we are big that big things are expected of us? No, no, we have amused Europe far too well since October, '99, it will not do to give them a repetition of the comedy, else in their delight at applauding the Mouse they might quite forget to tremble before the Lion. Is that the second bell, or the third?"

"The second," said Millar, glancing at his watch. "I have ten minutes more and I am all ears, for I am certain that there is more to say."

The General stood still at the extreme end of the platform which they had just reached, and to where the bustle of departure did not quite stretch.

"There would be this to say," he began, sinking his voice by a shade, as though in fear of passing listeners—"tell them over there not to put too absolute a faith in their girdle of water, not to feel too absolutely safe upon their island. For one alarmist who dares to pronounce the word 'Invasion' there are fifty soothing voices raised to calm the popular mind. The idea is treated as the panic-stricken nightmare of the faint-hearted; and here again the average Englishman fails to notice that he is reckoning with circumstances that have long ceased to exist. Because an invasion would have been impossible a hundred years ago, he cannot realise that this same undertaking has got enclosed in the circle of quite practicable manœuvres. The fleet! The fleet! is the first word to throw at the head of every objector—stuck fast as he is in the comfortable belief that so long as the fleet exists nothing can possibly happen to him. To us—us German officers, I mean—I have got back into my German skin for the moment you see—this confidence seems to verge on the naïve. We do not yet imagine that we can destroy the English fleet, but there are men among us who have long since hatched a plan—a purely academical supposition, of course, since we have no intention of quarrelling with England—of reaching English shores without having to measure ourselves with her vessels—for although nothing but a French invasion is ever talked of, the task does not lie within the reach of France alone. To begin with, why is it taken for granted that the invader's preparations would have to be made in the face of the world? The Germans are not considered to be a particularly sly nation, but what good would be our four North Sea havens if we were not sly enough to use them for quite inconspicuous arrangements? No doubt some sort of occupation would have to be found for the Channel fleet, and that occupation would, I fancy, be found while we were making our way quietly along the Danish coast—for why on earth should we choose the difficult southern coast for landing, when the eastern shore suits us so much better? And when you consider that even from the most distant of those four havens, that is, Cuxhaven, the passage in good weather takes no more than thirty-six hours, you will acknowledge that I am discussing no impossibilities."

"I don't deny that you could get in, but how could you get out?"

"The getting out would only be difficult if the invaders were too few compared to the defenders, and that would not be the case. It stands to reason that we would choose our moment, and with the unavoidable Colonial complications ready to suck dry the forces of the Mother-Country, that moment would be certain to come. And as for getting out again, why should there be any especial hurry? England is not a Russian steppe, after all, nor an African desert; the march from the east coast to London, on the excellent English roads and past the richly stocked farms, would be almost an excursion; and once in London and in possession of the Thames haven and its mass of provisions, I fancy that the German soldier would be the last to vote for a speedy return to his own country. It is not likely that he will turn his back upon London until peace is signed."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Millar, suddenly agitated, "and this plan of yours is considered feasible?"

"It is not a plan of mine; it was discussed quite seriously in print by an anonymous but evidently well-informed writer about four years ago, therefore long before the weaknesses of English army organisation had been revealed to a grinning world. Not only is the idea considered feasible, but even not particularly difficult of execution—so long, that is to say, as matters remain in their present basis. But they cannot so remain, and they will not. If we do not change them ourselves our adversaries will do that for us. Beside our present state of military helplessness even Conscription would have my vote."

"I have done with Conscription—in its Continental form, at any rate," said Millar, decisively—"since it seems that it cannot be had without militarism, I shall never persuade my countrymen—even if they were to be persuaded—to bend the knee to King Uniform."

"Ah," drily observed the General. Then, after a momentary pause: "And how about my skeleton army? Are you going home a convert?"

"I rather think I am. Your skeleton army is the one distinct idea I am taking home with me from Mannstadt."

"Then who knows whether you may not yet live to see it on its feet! You are young enough to do so. But, whatever you do, don't rest!—this plan or another, so long as we are stirring. And mind you tell John Bull, with my compliments, not to let himself be so utterly seduced by the preachers of the 'new' warfare as entirely to despise the old vulgar 'numbers.' Good Lord! is it so small a stake that we are playing for that a dread of a moderate change in our habits should cause us to lay our hands in our laps? Must not he who possesses be able to guard? Do we not know that only that house is safe in which the strong man, armed, watches? We are the strong man, but we are not adequately armed, except with self-satisfaction, and let us say it honestly—with presumption—not an empty presumption, thank God, but one which nevertheless has turned every man's hand against ours, which makes the despised 'foreigner' to whom we cannot more than amiably condescend, await with ill-concealed impatience the day when he can fall upon us in our sleep. But it must not come—that day—and it need not, unless we call it up ourselves. All that chatter about our degeneracy has been proved to be empty chatter—another benefit we owe to the war. We are neither degenerate nor weak, we are, on the contrary, irresistibly strong, if only we choose to put out our strength; we are inexhaustibly rich, if only we can make up our minds to draw upon our treasures. Upon *that* class of alarmists, the men who deny these glorious truths, I shall be the first to cast a stone.

There is nothing to fear of the future if we face it—there is everything to fear if we turn our backs upon it."

"You have got back into your English skin just now, have you not?" asked Millar, smiling a little as he gazed into the face of his friend, whose eyes, although he wore the uniform of the country of his adoption, had grown moist as he spoke of the country of his birth.

"The third bell!" he added regretfully—"I am off!"

"To keep John Bull awake," he was saying to himself two minutes later, as, leaning from the window of his compartment, he looked back at the platform on which the figure of General Russel was rapidly diminishing.

Within the same minute, upon the deck of an outward-bound steamer just quitting the harbour of Hamburg, a man and a woman stood side by side, looking back upon that German Fatherland which they were quitting for ever. The man's face sombre and drawn, fighting down the emotions which he would have hidden from his companion—the woman's wet with tears and yet radiant with hope; his eyes turned towards the past, hers towards the future, which she meant to conquer, which she was sure of conquering, by virtue of that Love which fears nothing and dares everything.

The German army is hard to beat, no doubt, yet for once King Uniform has been forced to yield up his crown in favour of a monarch even mightier than he.

THE END.

AUG 14 1902

1 COPY DEL. TO CAT. DIV.
AUG. 14 1902

AUG. 18 1902

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

0002167669A