”IF YOUTH BUT KNEW!”

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"IF YOUTH BUT KNEW!"

BY

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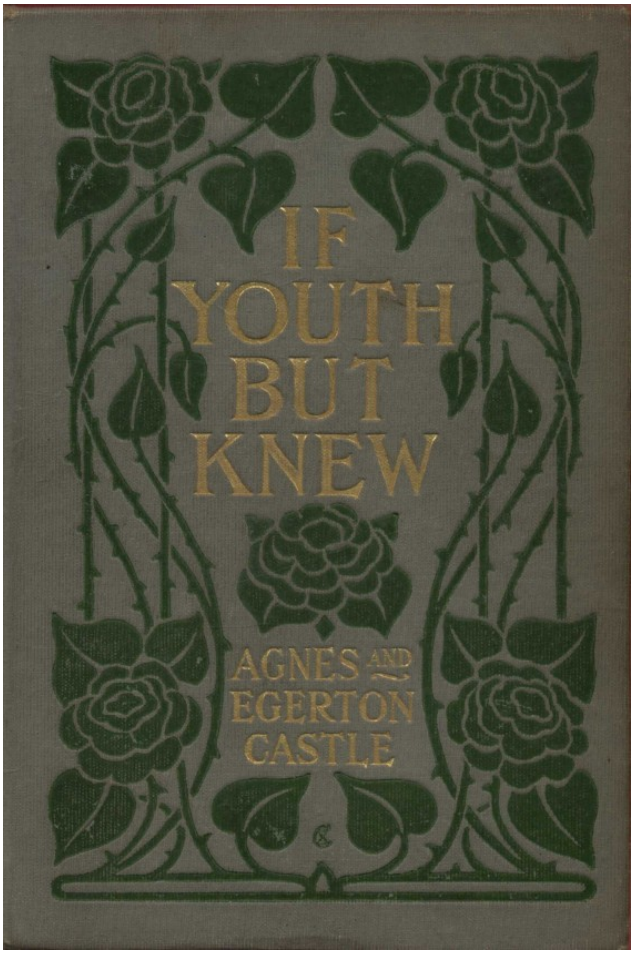
AUTHORS OF

"ROSE OF THE WORLD," "FRENCH NAN,"



Cover art

Her child eyes were still upon him and seemed to ask for something yet. And, at this, he bent and kissed her gently, as he would have kissed a child, and did not guess that, at the touch of his lips, Sidonia's woman's soul was born. (See page 196.)

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ETC., ETC.

"Si jeunesse savait...
Si vieillesse pouvait!"
(*Old French Song*)

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LANCELOT SPEED

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

TO
"MARIE-LOUISE"

FOREWORD

"Is it not," remarks Fiddler Hans the wanderer, somewhere in these pages, "instructive to see how the ruler of Westphalia passes his time while the best manhood of his country is warring for the Empire—burnt in Spain, frozen in Russia?"

Few people have cared, it would seem, to study that little chapter of history, the rule of Jerome in Westphalia; yet it is curious enough—as a record of human folly, if for no other reason.

That incredible Westphalia of Napoleon's making! Harlequin's coat contrived out of Hesse, Brunswick, and a score of smaller principalities, hemmed with a shred or two of Prussian province; incongruous rag torn from the map of the old Germanic Empire and flung by the conqueror, between two victories, to his "little brother Jerome"!

A strangely pusillanimous character was the amiable Jerome. His annals include, in the days of his youth, flight from his ship, within sight of an English blockading squadron (not through cowardice, be it said: there was pluck enough in the little man, but because of his thirst for the pleasures of land), and, in more mature years, desertion from the Grand Army at a crucial moment, upon the mere impulse of wounded vanity. How so grotesque a potentate was allowed, for seven years, to lord over, to plunder and demoralize, some three millions of sturdy Germans, to discredit the name of Bonaparte and weaken the fabric of the new Empire, remains one of the enigmas of history.

But, then, the new Emperor must ever be a maker of kings; carve new kingdoms out of old. For his "Beau Sabreur," Murat, there is Naples and the Two Sicilies; for his infant son, nothing less than Rome; for his younger brothers, Holland, Spain, ... Westphalia! What is there to restrain great Cæsar? Hark to his mighty insolence:

"The Emperor of the French" (*so M. Walckenaer, in his official work,* La Géographic Moderne, *brings to a conclusion the chapter on* la France allemande), "*possesses likewise in Germany the principality of Erfurth and the county of Katzenellenbogen:* mais Sa Majesté n'a pas encore décidé sur leur sort."

His Majesty has not yet decided upon their fate!

About the fate of Westphalia there had been no indecision. From one day to another, "little brother Jerome" acknowledged failure in every other career, naval, civil, or military, found himself seated upon a German throne. And thus we have him, inconceivable fop, strutting and ogling, upon the scene.—A king whose life energies, when the cracking of his brother's empire may be heard on every side, are divided between the devising of new costumes, the planning of revels, and the discovery of fresh favourites. A scamp, fascinating enough, but incapable of a single strong or noble thought. A cynic and a libertine; withal a gull, in his way. A man who could repudiate without a pang of regret the fair young Virginian wife of his youth, to marry without love a "suitable German princess." A man who flaunted his debauchery and his barefaced improbity, yet could be scared to distraction by

the imaginary threat of a little haunting tune; the tune which, with its twang of mockery and warning, was as ill an omen to his superstitious fancy as the shadow of "the little red man," or the date of Christmas, to his great Imperial brother.

And under him, that hasty patchwork of old German lands: his incongruous kingdom. His people, grave religious dwellers of the mountain and of the wood, unconvinced subjects of the godless Welsch, dumbly chafing under his insensate taxation. His new-fangled court, aping the vanished Versailles of Louis XV., yet combining with the reckless frivolity of the Old Order all the ill-breeding of revolutionary parvenus. *Over all, a government so incompetent, so corrupt, as to stupefy or demoralize all that had dealings with it—friend or foe, high or low, French official or German landowner; the magistrates, the very students; the old rulers of the soil themselves, nervously awaiting the inevitable* débâcle, *stretching, the while, both hands towards the plunder.*

In these topsy-turvy days no man rightly knows whether he belong to ancient Teutonic duchy or to French département; *whether the accepted rule be* code Napoléon *or hoary feudal law. And thus, up in his ancestral* Burg, *an old lord of the land (such an one as the Burgrave of Wellenshausen) may well assume that he still holds the right of "high and low justice" on his own territory; whereas, down at Cassel, the mock Versailles, this same out-of-date character would naturally fall in with the new views of marriage and divorce, or "annulment by decree," brought so conclusively into fashion by the Bonapartes, royal or Imperial.*

Above all this confusion, the cloud of war, gathering heavier and heavier. And from the mines of the Harz, from the deeps of the Thuringian forests, from the lanes of the old town, up into the very anterooms of the palace, conspiracy busy at work: conspiracy in the barracks, conspiracy in the universities, exploding on all sides, futile squibs as yet, but ominous. The King closes his eyes, seals his ears to all but sights and sounds of pleasure. So dancing, the harlequin kingdom goes to its death.

And it is through the mazes of this carnival, unique in the lenten gravity of nations, that wander the footsteps of the singer of youth, and of the lovers of this story.

O hear me sing:—If youth but knew
The glory of his April day,
Would he not cast the year away
For one more dawn of dream and dew?

Would he the fevered moons pursue,

Not rather with the spring delay,
Crowned with its leaf? If youth but knew
The glory of his April day!

For what shall unto age accrue,
If youth from joyance turn and stray?
Autumn is but the Spring grown grey,
Its harvest roses mixed with rue....

If youth but knew—if youth but knew!

(*The Singer of Youth*)

ELINOR SWEETMAN

IF YOUTH BUT KNEW

CHAPTER I
THE VAGABOND

"*Wealth I seek not, hope nor love,*
Nor a friend to know me;
All I seek, the heaven above
And the road below me."
R. L. STEVENSON.

The traveller sat upon the milestone just where the road, skirting the brow of the hill, branched off into the forest. At his feet lay the detached wheel; further away, in pathetic attitude, the remainder of the chaise itself. A stout bay, seemingly unconscious of as handsome a pair of broken knees as ever horse displayed, was tethered to a stump of tree, browsing such tender grass or leafage as grew within

" The something that lived on, the miserable carcass, the old man — call it myself, if you will — it took the violets and began to walk away. . . . And it has walked ever since ! "

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his reach. The situation spoke for itself; and the young traveller's face spoke for the situation as eloquently as Nature (who had bestowed upon him a markedly disdainful and somewhat impassive set of features) would permit.

Behind him rose the cool gloom of the forest. Below lay the plain, gold-powdered by the level rays of a sinking sun. Between the edge of the road and the forest margin ran a stream. A robin sang to the glowing west from the topmost branch of a fir tree. But he on the milestone was blind to the gold of the valley, deaf to the gold of the song. "Now, here's a pretty kettle of fish!" was the burden of his thoughts.

To have been stuck a whole hour upon a stone, while a postilion ranged the country on horseback in one direction, and a valet a-foot in the other, and no help as yet forthcoming; not to have had himself within hail, all those weary minutes, one single human being—between intervals of drowsiness he cursed the peaceful valley land, with its fair fields and orchards, as the most God-forsaken of countries!

Presently his moody eye quickened. On the road below a moving object was approaching. Only a pedestrian, alas! Nevertheless, he might prove of use for succour or advice.

But, as the oncomer drew nearer and began to foot the ascent, the glimmer of hope died in the discontented gentleman's heart. Here was no sturdy native, likely guide to smithy or village inn. 'Twas a mere ambulant musician, as strange, doubtless, to the country as himself: the sun-rays were even now glinting back, roseate, from the varnish of a fiddle.—The traveller relapsed into moodiness.

At the steep curve of the hillside, man and fiddle vanished from view. Nevertheless, that he was still climbing, the advance (in interrupted measure) of a singular little tune, half sourdine, half pizzicato, soon proclaimed. It seemed at first so woven in with the babble of the brook, the deep choiring of the forest and the song of the robin, that the youth on the milestone hardly realized its separate existence. But, as it hovered ever closer, he was forced to listen and even to follow. It seemed the very song of the rover; of the rover on foot, humble and yet proud; without a penny, without a bond; glad of the free water to drink and the hunk of bread by the roadside—a song of the nodding grass and the bird in the hedge, of the dancing leaf, the darting swallow, the wide kindly skies. Oh, the road is full of gay things, and tender things, of sweetness and refreshment, of wholesome fatigue and glorious sleep, for those that know its secrets!

"Good evening to you, young sir."

The little tune had stopped. A man's figure, exaggeratedly thin, black against the sunset, had emerged over the knuckle of the hill and, with a wide sweep of the arm, was saluting.

The gesture of the black silhouette seemed so courtly, the voice that came

But, as the oncomer drew nearer, the glimmer of hope died in the discontented gentleman's heart.

from it so refined, that the young gentleman almost rose to return the salutation: but, in time, he caught sight of the violin curves.... Pooh, it was the fiddling vagabond! Ashamed of his impulse, he drew forth a florin and flung it.

The musician skipped nimbly on one side; the coin fell, flashing in the red sun-shafts. He looked from it to the imperious donor, whose face he scanned keenly for a moment, then smiled; and his teeth shone as white as a wolf's in the deep tan of his face. Then off went his battered hat again and out was stretched a sinewy leg in dusty blue stocking, to accompany a bow such as twenty years ago might have roused the envy of your finest Versailles marquis.

"I greet you! I salute you, my young lord!" The fiddler rose from his inclination and burst out laughing. "Oh, cease fondling those pistols in your pocket, worthy sir," cried he, "for by Calliope, daughter of Jove and Mnemosyne, 'tis not your money-bags I covet just now, but, oh! your golden youth!"

"The fellow has a wild eye," thought the gentleman. Now, it is a question whether even a highway robber were not more agreeable to encounter on a lonely road than a madman.

"If it be madness to honour in you such a gift of the gods," said the singular vagrant, reading the thought, "why then, yes, I am mad, sir—stark, staring."

He fell back on one foot and bent the advanced knee, tucked his instrument under his chin, where it settled like a bird to its nest, and drew his bow across the strings with a long plaint.

"O youth!" he intoned between two sighs of the catgut. "O spring! O wings of the soul! O virginity of the heart, expectation, unknown mysteries of life! O wealth of strength and yearning!—See, now, how you sit," he cried, dropping into speech again, "on the fringe of the forest, in a strange land, with the sunset valley at your feet, and the stream running you know not where beside you, and the bird over your head singing the desires of your soul. Why, by Apollo, young man, here are you in your youth, in the spring of your world, in the very middle of an adventure, and——"

Again limber fingers moved along the strings; and, with a sense of wonder, the traveller felt within his being some answering outcry. But he stiffened himself against it.

"Harkee, my man," said he, trying to frown, "I am in no mood for fooling. Take up your florin, and begone.—Or, stay, earn another by telling me, if you can, where I am, and how far lies the nearest village?"

"Sir," replied the other, urbanely, "fellow-travellers should assist each other without any sordid consideration. (Ah, had you offered me of your youth, now!) You are, an it please you, just between the border of that old, steady-going principality of Schwarzburg and the new-fangled, patchwork kingdom which appertaineth to his Majesty King Jerome—himself one of the crowning products of the

Great Revolution!"

"Faugh!" said the gentleman.

The fiddler's restless eye lighted.

"My lord is an Englishman? In verity and beyond doubt, none but an Englishman could wear so lofty a front. I need scarce have asked."

The young man stared haughtily. The other considered him awhile in silence with a sort of grave mockery, and pursued then reflectively—

"This English aloofness, 'tis an excellent prescription for pride and disdain and such-like high essences. Only be careful, my brother-wayfarer, that you be not above your own fair youth, and contemn not its splendid opportunities.

'Singula de nobis annipraedantur euntes'

O young man! ...

'Eripuere jocos, Venerem, convivia, ludum'

think of it!"

So saying, he shouldered his instrument, and with a valedictory wave of his bow seemed about to take his departure; but, as if upon a second thought, stood still, and once again observed the young man.

Now it struck the stranded traveller that there was a dignity in the vagrant's gaze, a refinement about his person, which scarce accorded with the gipsy appearance, the shabby clothes; that it was not usual for beggars to quote Horace with delicate accents of culture; that his salutation had been a pattern of courtliness; above all, that he was not the least impressed by a young nobleman's most noble demeanour. And he, on his milestone, began to feel slightly foolish—an ingenuous blush, indeed, crept to his cheeks.

The player hitched round his fiddle till it lay across his breast, and pinched a couple of strings as a man might pinch the cheek of the wench he loved.

"Pardi," he said, speaking into its curved ear, "that flag of crimson would proclaim that there's hope for the youth yet.—Sir," proceeded he then, gaily, "I think I can be of use to you. I place myself at your service. May I crave to know whom I have the honour of addressing?"

"You address," responded the other, "Steven Lee, Graf zu Waldorff-Kielmansegg, an Austrian gentleman (if you must know) travelling towards his estate in the south." He had an irrepressible satisfaction in the recital.

"Austrian?" echoed the listener, with a cock of one of his expressive eyebrows. "'Tis a safer nationality to proclaim than the English, for travellers in great Cæsar's dominions nowadays. Oh, you are right, quite right! 'Twould be

the height of rashness to proclaim even a drop of English blood, these days, where Monsieur Buonaparte rules!"

The taunt struck home. Red mantled again on the gentleman's smooth cheek.

"Despite an Austrian father, I have by my dead mother enough English blood in these veins," cried he, hotly, "to hate the usurper and despite his upstart brothers—if that is what you mean; and I care not who knows it!"

The fiddler's smile grew broader. "Youth," whispered he to his violin, "may pretend to abjure itself, but it will out. The stripling has spirit, though it be but the spirit of scorn.—But the ceremony is not complete," pursued he. "I have now to return your compliment. Above all things, let us be polite. Here, then, comrade, you see before you an individual known all over the country as the crazy musician, sometimes more tersely as Geiger-Hans—what in your English you might call Fiddle-John. Some call me the Scholar Vagabond, and some, the children (bless them), Onkel. Like your own, my nationality is a matter of indecision. Some say I am French, some German, some from over the Alps—take your choice; your choice, too, of my title: Geiger-Hans, Fiddle-John, or Geiger-Onkel. Or you may dub me, if you please, the Singer of Youth."

But by this time, Steven Lee, Count Kielmansegg, was disgusted with himself for having betrayed so much of his feelings to a beggar vagrant.

"Doubtless," remarked he, with infinite arrogance, "it may prove more convenient for you, at times, to hide your name, good fellow. Reassure yourself, I have no curiosity to learn it."

Whereupon Geiger-Hans gathered his brows into so deep a frown that the whole hillside seemed to grow black. He struck the strings of his instrument, and they called out as with anger.

"My name," he said under his breath, "my name, boy, is dead—as dead as my youth." Then he grew calm as suddenly as he had stormed. "Some happy ones there are who die and whose names live: I live, and my name is dead. Let that suffice to you. Why, see," he cried next, with another swift change of tone, while Count Steven stared at him, his slow Austrian blood, his deliberate English wits, unable to keep pace with such vivacity of mood, "it is getting dark ... the sun has dropped behind the valley line ... the forest is full of night already! Do not the lights of unknown shelter beckon you—the chimney-corner, the strange hospitality? Why, Heaven knows what sweet hostess may not greet your youthship to-night! And if your soul cries not out for fair adventure in forest depth, there, at least, is a poor dumb thing that craves stable and corn." As he spoke, he stepped nimbly to the injured horse and unhitched the reins from the tree. "Might you not have bathed those cut knees?" he exclaimed, shooting a look of rebuke over the animal's meek head. "And the kindly brook running charity at your elbow!"

He led the creature to the stream; and the deed of compassion accomplished, again turned to his companion with a smile, which seemed to show knowledge of all the latter's vacillating thoughts of vexation and shame.

"Lend me a hand with the wheel, comrade, and let us see if we cannot improvise a linchpin. And then, if you push behind, this forgiving beast will do his best to draw your goods into safety."

But it was the musician who mended the wheel, while the traveller watched in wonder the work of the brown hands. And then, in the falling dusk, they set upon their slow way: Steven Lee, Graf zu Waldorff-Kielmansegg, pushing behind even as bid, the fiddler marching ahead with the reins slung over his arm and humming a hunting song under his breath.

Leaving the stones and dust of the high-road, he led the way along a wide path that seemed to cut the forest in two and run downhill into the horizon. Beneath their feet was now an elastic carpet of pine-needles. On each side of them the serried ranks of trees held the night already in a thousand arms and murmured to it with a voice as of the sea. Before them, at the end of the nave, and set like a cathedral window, shone a span of sky, primrose and green, with one faint star. And presently Steven saw, to one side far ahead, an orange square of light, and knew it for the unknown forest shelter beckoning to him.

"But what," cried he, struck by a sudden thought, "of my postilion and my valet?"

Geiger-Hans looked back at him over his shoulder and grinned. He slid the reins above his elbow and grasped his violin.

"To the devil," it sang mockingly, through the glade, "to the devil with postilions and valets! to the devil with prudence and forethought! O youth, enjoy your youth! O youth, be young!"

CHAPTER II
THE FOREST HOUSE

"Diesen liebenswürd'gen Jüngling
Kann man nicht genug verehren..."
HEINE.

"Heaven knows," had said the musician, "what sweet hostess may not greet your youthship to-night."

To their knock the door was opened by a slip of a peasant girl. The light from within shone on her long yellow plaits of hair and her small brown face.

Steven was conscious of a distinct shock of disappointment. What folly had this fantastic chance companion fiddled into his mind that he should have found himself expecting something meet for his high-born fancy in this lonely forest house?

"Geiger-Onkel!" cried the girl, in surprise.

And "Geiger-Onkel!" was echoed joyfully indoors. An old peasant woman came waddling forward, hands outstretched.

"Be kind to my comrade, Forest-mother," said the player, "while I see to this brother beast."

He led the horse towards the back yard. And Steven stepped into the great kitchen, glad at least of its prosaic aroma of pot-herbs, since romance had fallen silent with the fiddle.

It was a long room, panelled with age-polished oak which reflected the light of the hanging brass lamp and of the ruddy hearth as jonquil flamelets and poppy glow. A black oaken table, running nearly from end to end, was covered half-way with a snowy cloth, red-hemmed and flowered. There were presses, laden with crockery and pewter. There was a tall clock, with a merry painted face and a solemn tick. There were stags' horns and grinning boars' heads above the presses. Not that Steven had any interest to bestow on these things: he was glad that the place was clean. He thought the oaken chair hard sitting for his noble person, but it was better than the milestone. The Forest-mother seemed a decent sort of body; with a due sense, too, of the quality of her guest. As for the peasant child, he did not notice her at all—not even the pretty foot in buckled shoe and scarlet stocking, of which the short peasant skirt gave such a generous display.

Yet it was to her that Geiger-Hans made his courtly bow as he entered in his turn.

"Mamzell Sidonia!" said he, his old hat clapped over his heart.

She gave him a smile, half tender, half mischievous. And her teeth were as white as his own in her sunburnt face. There was a whole host of dimples, too, which a young man might have remarked. But what mattered the dimples of a peasant girl?

Then the fiddler took the old woman round the neck and kissed her plump, wholesome cheek with a smack.

"Supper, supper!" cried he. "And if it's good, you shall have such music that your hearts shall sing."

The girl laughed out loud, and ran to the hearth, where she seized a pot.

"In Heaven's name," cried the woman, "leave that, child! 'Tis not fit for you."

"Oh, please," urged Sidonia of the yellow plaits, "please, little foster-mother!"

Forest-mother to the fiddler, foster-mother to the girl. Steven had supposed her grandmother. Bah! As if, indeed, it were worth a thought!

"Get the wine, then," said the matron, with a jolly, unctuous chuckle.

And while, swinging long tails of hair and scarlet ankles flashing, the girl darted round the table, what must this fantastic fellow Geiger-Hans do but introduce guest and hostess with one of his absurd flourishes.

"Here, dear comrade, is Dame Friedel, mother of the great King Jerome's own Head Forester. And here, mother, is a most noble Austrian count, whom the accidents of travel have forced to condescend to the shelter of your humble roof this evening."

Deep curtsied Dame Friedel. Steven inclined his head; and, feeling the fiddler mock him behind his back, grew red and angry.

"A glass in welcome, gracious sir!" tittered Sidonia, at his elbow.

She was so close to him that his cheek was fanned by her breath of clover and the fragrance of a little bunch of violets in her white kerchief rose to his nostrils. As she bent, offering him the green goblet of wine, her heavy plait fell against his shoulder. He drew back haughtily.

"*Peste!*" cried Geiger-Hans, "how my fingers itch for the strings. But never mind, you shall lose nothing by waiting. *Tarteifel!* mother, as I live, venison stew! What feasts you good people make in your forest house!"

"My son is hungry when he comes home of nights, and so are his lads.—My little love, will you sit and entertain the gentlemen?"

Sidonia, pouting, drew her chair with great clatter round by that of Geiger-Hans and turned a shoulder on the count, who thus remained isolated, as became his rank. The fiddler drank to her and she filled his glass again. And, as she stretched across him to do so, the violets at her breast fell upon his hand.

"Violets!" cried he, and sat as if turned to stone. His brown face grew ashen. Then he pushed his plate away, took up the flowers and pressed them against his lips, inhaling the scent of them with long deep breaths. Presently the tears ran down his cheeks; his slow-drawn sighs were cut short by a kind of sob. The girl started to the old woman's side and stood, flushed and downcast, while the Forest-mother beat her omelet with a grave countenance. Neither of them looked at the fiddler. Steven, who had stared, suddenly dropped his glance, too, ashamed and uncomfortable. Geiger-Hans got up from his seat.

"I can eat no more to-night," he said, in a broken voice. He walked over to

As she bent, offering him the green goblet of wine, her heavy plait fell against his shoulder. He drew back haughtily.

the bench where he had left his fiddle, and, hugging it, went out into the forest.

"Have you ever seen him like that before?" whispered Sidonia of mother Friedel.

"Once," said she, "and it was over the violet-bed in the garden. I doubt he has seen trouble, poor soul! Who has not?"

Sidonia returned to her seat, propped her chin on her hands and fixed the young count absently. Her eyes were not black as he had thought: they were grey and green, green and golden brown, like the waters of the brook in the shadow of the trees.

"Heavens, sir, how you stare!" she said after a while, pettishly.

The young aristocrat, whose thoughts had been all engrossed by this new eccentricity of his road acquaintance, raised his disdainful eyebrows. He stare at a country wench? Then into their sullen silence mother Friedel exclaimed joyfully.

"Hark!" cried she, "here comes my son!"

From far away stole the faint blast of hunting-horns; a dog bayed answer from the kennels, then the call of the horns arose again in the whispering forest depths, closer and louder.

"Yes, yes, it's the 'return home' they're winding," said the old woman, bending her ear.

Without, there now rose a fine clamour: barking and yelping of hounds, tramping of horses, blasting of horns, cheerful shouting of men. The head forester shot half his stalwart figure in at the door and nodded with some mystery to his mother. What could be seen of his green uniform was very grand indeed, with vast display of gilt buttons and royal crowns, frogs and braid. His square, freckled face, made for jollity, was puckered into anxious lines; his eyes roamed uneasily from Sidonia to the stranger. He strode to his mother's side and whispered in her ear.

"Be good to us!" she ejaculated, clapping her hands, all dismay.

"Hush, mother!" warned the forester, finger on lip, and turned towards the door.

Count Steven had finished his plate of venison stew, and was condescending to enjoy a crust of bread with a glass of the tart wine. The sense of expectation about him made him now likewise turn round in his chair—languidly, for the high-born are never openly curious.

Outside, in the night, against a background of flickering leaves and under the glare of a couple of torches, he saw a picturesque group of hounds and huntsmen; two of these last laden each with a murdered roebuck, whose pretty, innocent head hung trailing on the ground. Suddenly the scene dissolved. A man came from the midst of the foresters into the kitchen. The rest disappeared

with their booty; hounds and horses were led away towards the distant kennel premises; the woodland glade resumed its peace.

As the new-comer passed him, the head forester made a spasmodic movement, arrested midway, of hand to forehead. His mother swept a dignified curtsey. The peasant girl, her hands clasped at the back of her neck, stared with frank curiosity, her mouth open so that all who cared to look might wonder upon the doubled splendour of her young teeth.

He stood and glanced round upon them all: a slight young man of somewhat low stature and dark, fine-cut face, with hair cropped short at back and side to come down in a curly wave in the middle of his forehead. He had large eyes under thick, straight eyebrows; and his forester's uniform, though ostensibly of the same cut as Friedel's, was of finer cloth and obviously brand new. The collar of the coat rose very high on each side of his chin, which in the centre rested on folds of delicate cambric.

"Positively," thought Steven Lee, Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg, etc., "a gentleman like myself!"

But the hunter's first word dispelled the illusion.

"My friend," said the new-comer to the old dame—he spoke German with a strong foreign accent—"my fellow-forester there, Friedel, has assured me that you would give his brother woodsman hospitality to-night."

Now, as he smiled, his handsome face assumed a trivial, almost inane, expression, which destroyed its look of breeding and caused Count Steven to return to his bread and wine with a mental shrug.

"Any friend of my son is welcome here," said the old lady, smiling doubtfully.

Friedel himself grew suddenly scarlet, gulped, blinked and looked as uncomfortable as any fish out of water.

"I see I must introduce myself," cried the little man, laughing heartily and clapping him on the shoulder. "I am Mr. Forester—ahem!—Meyer, at your service, madame."

"I wish," said Steven, "that you would shut the door behind my back, good people."

"Hey la!" said Mr. Forester Meyer, with a sudden imperious note in his voice, "whom have we here?"

"A guest, sir, like yourself," said the hostess somewhat dryly, hieing to her pans; while the young nobleman in question turned his heavy chair round again to supplement her inadequate description.

"An Austrian gentleman, my man, if it imports you to know," said he. "You are yourself, perhaps," he went on with more friendliness, struck by an obvious explanation of certain signs about the new-comer that had puzzled him, "the

inspector of these forests on your rounds. I notice you speak with authority, and your accent is not of the country—a countryman of this King Jerome?"

Mr. Forester Meyer broke again into loud laughter.

"Hey! what perspicacity has the gentleman!" cried he, jovially. "(Friend Friedel, shut the door!) Nay, truly, sir, you are perfectly right. I see it would be quite hopeless to maintain an *incognito* before you. It is true, sir, I do inspect for this King Jerome occasionally. Ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha!" echoed Sidonia, catching the infection of mirth, as a child will, without reason.

"Hey la! And whom have we there?"

Mr. Forest-Inspector repeated the phrase in very different tones. There came a curious flicker into his eye as he ran it up and down the girl's figure, from crown of yellow head to scarlet ankle and back again, with appreciative pauses on the way.

"Eh, eh!" said he, meaningly. He took her chin between his finger and thumb, and chuckled as he raised the crimsoning face to the light.

"We do not hold with French ways here," said Dame Friedel, rebukingly, over her pan.

Steven, catching the gesture of warning which her son instantly addressed to her, felt a vast contempt for the fellow's slavish fear of his little superior.

The wine, thin and fragrant, must have gone somewhat fantastically to the young nobleman's brain. He began to feel defiant, in a humorous sort of way, and to wish the fiddler back with his music. With his violin to accompany the song of the amber drink, it seemed as if that youthship of his (on which yonder fantastic rogue laid such stress) might find some zest in a quarrel with Master Forester Meyer, whose eyes danced so unpleasantly as they looked at this peasant child; who had so irritating a French shrug and so mean a smile.

Now, if he had an eye to a pretty girl, the inspector seemed to have also an ear for a poacher. The distant crack of shots, reverberating from the forest, now made him start and listen acutely. Yet as Friedel, with a frowning countenance, made a lurch for his gun in the corner, Mr. Meyer smiled and restrained him. Then he himself went to the door, set it ajar and hearkened. His smile widened as he closed it again and returned to the table.

"Doubtless he has plans of his own for trapping the trespassers," thought Steven. It was the obvious explanation. And yet he felt a kind of mystery brooding around him, almost as if that adventure which the fiddler's music had boded were about to take place. And, in the long silence which succeeded, the impression deepened. The Frenchman seemed overcome by an uncontrollable restlessness. He paced the room from end to end, compared the merry-faced clock with his watch, stared out of the window and drummed on the pane. He was evidently

keenly on the alert for something: and, as Steven vainly cudgelled his not very quick wits to conjecture, behold, it was at hand!

Shouts without, steps ... a tremendous rat-tat at the door!...

"'Tis not possible," cried mother Friedel, with some distress, "that Heaven has sent us more guests?"

This was, in truth, precisely what Heaven was doing, if, indeed, it were fair to hold Heaven responsible. Two new visitors walked into the forest home without so much as a word of parley. A hulking man, also in forester's uniform ("By Saint Hubert," said Steven Lee to himself, "his Westphalian Majesty's rangers seem thick as leaves hereabouts!"), and a lady clinging to his arm.... Yes, a lady, and a fair! Steven rose to his feet.

The inspector and the burly new-comer interchanged a rapid glance. Then, cracking the whip he held in his hand, the latter burst into the most execrable German, interspersed by volleys of French oaths. It was evident that King Jerome held to servants of his own nationality.

Morbleu! quoth he, it was a mercy to see decent shelter! Devil take all, he had thought that he and the lady would have had to spend the night in the forest!

Here the lady, in spite of very pink cheeks and bright eyes, became so faint that she had to be assisted to a chair by mother Friedel and her foster-child. Steven darted to present a glass of water, but was arrogantly forestalled by Mr. Meyer.

"Such a scandal on his Majesty's high-road!" went on he of the whip: "this lady's coach attacked by ruffians!"

"His Majesty will be exceedingly displeased," said Mr. Meyer, gravely, sitting down by the side of the distressed one and stripping off her glove to consult a delicate wrist.

"Her escort shot at—— By all the devils!"

"Monstrous," quoth the inspector, in quiet indignation. "A little wine, madam?"

"The escort—sacred swine, confound them!—took flight and basely abandoned their charge."

"Shocking—shocking!" said Mr. Meyer, relinquishing one pretty hand to receive the empty glass from the other.

"If I had not happened to hear the shots and rush to the spot, what might not have happened?"

"It makes me shiver to contemplate it," asserted the inspector.

"My brave deliverer," murmured the lady, in a dulcet voice. "Single-handed, he——"

She suddenly buried her face in her hands and quivered from head to foot.

The inspector looked up at mother Friedel with an air of grave compassion.

"Hysterical," said he; "ah, no wonder!"

Dame Friedel began to loosen the lady's handsome claret-coloured travelling-mantle, whilst Sidonia drew a velvet, white-plumed hat from the loveliest dark head in all the world.

"Well ... ah!—Schmidt," said Inspector Meyer, "his Majesty will hear of your conduct."

"Thank you, Mr.—ah!—Meyer," rejoined the burly Schmidt, with an unaccountably waggish grin.

"Ah, ha, ha!" cried the lady. She flung back her head and flung down her hands; the tears were streaming upon her uncovered cheeks. It might be hysterics, but Steven thought it was the most becoming combination of emotions he had ever beheld.

She wiped her eyes and sprang up as lightly as a bird. Emerging from the folds of her cloak, she displayed a clinging robe of pale blue, fastened under the bust by a belt of amethysts set in gold. She had an exquisite roundness of form; an open, smiling mouth. Her eyes were innocent and dark and deep. She was (Steven felt) a revelation. And withal, what a great lady! What an air of breeding! What elegance! An Austrian gentleman knows the value of jewels. Heavens, what rings on her fingers! What pearls in her ears!

"*Ah, Dio mio!*" she cried, "but I am hungry!"

Italian, then. There was a strange medley of nationalities in this German forest corner.

The fixity of the young man's gaze suddenly drew the lady's attention. She looked at him: surprise, interest, then an adorable smile appeared on her countenance. It was almost an invitation. Besides, was it not meet that the only gentleman of the party should entertain the only lady? With his heart beating in his throat, he took two steps forward. The three foresters had drawn apart and were whispering together with furtive glances in his direction; but he was not likely to notice this when such lovely eyes were upon him. She dropped her handkerchief. He rushed to pick it up. As she took it from his fingers, he gave them ever so slight a pressure.

(Oh, Geiger-Hans, Singer of Youth, hadst thou foreseen this rapturous moment?)

"A thousand graces," murmured she. The graces! they were all her own.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he stammered.

But the inspector cut him short with a strident voice.

"The gentleman must be fatigued," he cried.

Steven started angrily. To one side of him stood Forester Schmidt, to the other, Forester Friedel.

"I will show the gracious gentleman the way to his repose," said the latter

in his ear, with subdued, yet warning tone.

"And I will give you my help to the door, *tonnerre de Brest!*" exclaimed the other, and caught the Count's arm under his with a grip of iron.

Steven wrenched himself free. Yet a man has not sober English blood in him for nothing. Humiliating as was the position, a moment's reflection convinced him that resistance and futile struggle would but render him ridiculous. Ridiculous, in the light of those dark eyes!

"Lead, then, fellow," said he to Friedel; and, after bowing low to the lady, followed his escort with what dignity he could muster towards the door opening on the forest.

There was such a seething of rage in his brain, such an itching in his palm to feel it against yonder insolent Schmidt's full cheek, that it was not till he found himself on the threshold of a dimly lighted wooden building, gazing blankly in upon heaps of straw, that he realized that a barn was considered good enough for the night's lodging of a Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg.

"May you rest you sweetly, sir," said Friedel, and tramped away.

CHAPTER III
GREEN ADVENTURE

"*Non ego hoc ferrem, calidus juventa,*
Consule Planco."
HORACE.

"Comrades again!"

Turning round with a start, Steven beheld the crazy musician at his elbow.

"Comrades on the straw—eh! What a bed for his lordship. *Misérables!* they have no conception of the importance of rank, these benighted forest folk. Yet give me the clean, yellow straw, smelling in the dark of sunshine and whispering of the fields, rather than your stuffy German mountains of feathers."

"Geiger-Onkel! Geiger-Onkel!" came a shrill cry into the night.

The fiddler turned with a bound and ran into the middle of the moonlit yard, staring up at the house that stood outlined against the pale sky. From some distant regions, where Friedel's underlings kennelled near their hounds, rose shouts

of boorish laughter and the chorus of a drinking song.

A yellow tongue of flame appeared in a wooden balcony, hanging under the roof. Sidonia bent over, shielding her candle from the forest airs.

"Are you there, Geiger-Onkel?"

"Yes, child."

"Oh, I am glad.... Geiger-Onkel"—she leaned over still further; her tresses hung down, one shone ruddy with the candle-gleam and one silver in the moonlight; her voice was broken with angry tremors—"he tried to kiss me!"

"*Mort de ma vie*—who?"

"The big man with the whip. He caught me by the waist. I had nothing to hit him with but my plaits. I lashed him in the face. They caught him across the eyes——"

"Caught him across the eyes," cried the fiddler, clapping his hands. "Ah, brava, little mamzell!"

"They whistled like a rope"—the girl was laughing and crying together—"I think I have half-blinded him. Mayn't I come down to you, Onkel? I want to talk ... and I want music."

"Better not," said fiddler Hans, after a moment's reflection; and then from the shadow Steven stepped out beside him. (It was terrible to think of the dark-eyed lady in the company of such ruffians!) Sidonia, with a cry, drew back at sight of the new shadow.

"Nay, never be afraid of him. It is my comrade. As for the others—why, go in, child; bolt your door," said the fiddler. "Go to bed and sleep in peace. I shall watch."

"But you will play for me?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Presently, I may," said he; "such a tune, little mamzell, that will make some people dance! But to you it shall give sweet sleep."

As the girl disappeared, Geiger-Hans turned upon Steven. He laughed as he addressed the young man, but his eyes were fierce as some wild beast's in the dim light.

"Did you hear?" said he. "The maid struck him; but you—oh you—you let yourself be turned out! Oh, to see you trot away like a lamb. Steven Lee, Graf zu Waldorff-Kielmansegg, turned out of doors by two low-bred foresters! What, then, runs in your veins? What, turnip-juice instead of blood? The fellow, Schmidt so-called, laid hands on you, did he not? And you a youth! By the blood of my fathers, had the creature touched me, old man as I am, he had felt the weight of his own whip! But the fellow has muscles. Nay, you were right, sir, right. Let us be prudent, by all means. Only that mask of yours lies, that smooth cheek, that crisp curl—all lies. Young, yes. Only your heart is not young. 'Tis like the kernel of a blind nut—dry dust. While I—there is more of God's youth

left in my worn and waning body——"

"Confusion!" interrupted Steven, trembling in every limb, hurt to the marrow of his pride; "it was before the lady."

"Oh, the lady...!" echoed the other, with a mocking trail of laughter.

During the vehemence of his speech the musician had advanced on the lad, who had unconsciously drawn back until he stood against the wall of the house. Now a window close to him was unlatched; and the sound of a sigh, rather than a voice, was breathed forth into the night.

"*Ah, Dio!*"

"Your cue!" mocked the fiddler into his ear, and melted away into the darkness.

The window was that of a room on the ground floor; the lady leaned out, her elbows on the sill; her face caught a slanting ray of moonlight. Was it possible for anything mortal to be so beautiful?

"Madam!" cried Steven, and that heart of his which was supposed to be but dry dust began to thump in hitherto unknown fashion.

"Hush, hush!" she whispered, a taper finger on her lip. "Ah, is it you, sir?"

He advanced into the ray that held her. He was not aware that he also looked goodly and romantic. Somewhere, in the darkness close by, the fiddler's bow crept over the strings. It was a sound so attenuated that it seemed to have no more substance than the light of the moon itself; it stole upon their ears so gently that it was as if they heard it not. His hand met her warm fingers—the fragrance from her curls mounted to his nostrils; she looked up at him and her eyes glistened.

Oh, fiddler, what bewitching music is this? What sweetness does it insinuate, what mysterious audacity counsel? There were those parted lips of hers, with white teeth gleaming through, and here was this youth who had never touched a woman's lips in love. Such a little way between his bent head and her upturned face...!

A door crashed behind her. She started from his timid hand. The thread of the music was broken like a floating gossamer.

Steven thought that the fiddler laughed. There was a faint exclamation. Heavens! did she also laugh? He saw—yes, he saw the inspector's hated outline over hers. She was drawn from the window by the shoulders, the shutters were clapped to in his face and bolted noisily. The yard billowed under his feet. All went red before his eyes. That was her room, and the man had followed her to it! Had he no youth in him, no blood in his veins? ... Why, he could taste it on his tongue! He pivoted round upon himself, made a blind rush for the entrance

door, and dashed headlong against Ranger Schmidt's broad chest.

A French oath rang out. Then broken German: "Can the kerl not see where he is going?" Then, in the dark, the fiddler laughed again. Or was it his music? or were there lurking devils taunting, jeering, inciting? The young man never knew exactly what happened till a crack like a pistol-shot sprang upon the night, and he realized that his hand had found the broad, insolent face at last. The sound of that slap cleared the confusion in his own brain as a puff of wind clears a hanging mist. Schmidt gave a roar like a furious bull, but Steven met the onslaught of the uplifted whip with the science learned in London of Gentleman Jackson and there was a grip on either side which began for him in glorious defiance and ended in a struggle of life and death.

The fiddler worked his bow like one possessed. It was a fierce song of fight that now rose, ever shriller, louder, and faster, up towards the placid sky. The air was thick with the curses, blue with the profanity, of Forester Schmidt. But Steven fought like a gentleman, in silence. To his dying day he maintained that he was getting the better of the hulking bully, when his heel caught in an upstanding root, and he fell with a crash, his opponent over him. There was a moment's agony of suffocation, then the gleam before his eyes of a bared blade, gilt-blue in the moonlight, two echoing shouts, a woman's scream. And then Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg lost consciousness, his wits marching away at double-quick time to the lilt of an extraordinarily joyous vulgar little tune.

* * * * *

"Oh, Geiger-Onkel, is he dead?"

The girl with the yellow plaits stood in the light of the lantern; her wide eyes seemed to devour her face, white even in that uncertain glimmer; her parted lips quivered. From the forest house came the sound of loud wrangling voices, dominated presently by rhythmic feminine screams. In the kennels the dogs were barking furiously: it was a distracting clamour.

Yet the stillness of the young man's comely figure, relaxed at its length on the straw, the pallor of his head, thrown back like a sleeping child's against the fiddler's knee, seemed to make its own circle of silence.

"Dead?" echoed the vagrant. "Dead for a crack on the skull!" His tone was contemptuous. Yet his lean hands shook as they busied themselves in loosening Count Steven's very fine stock; and there was concern in his attitude as he bent over the youth's face, cruelly beautiful in its white unconsciousness.

Now Sidonia, the forest-mother's foster-child, remembered Geiger-Hans as far back as she could remember anything, and knew every shade of that sardonic visage. Dark she had often seen it, with a far-away melancholy—a melancholy, it

seemed, beyond anything that life could touch. She had known it alight with mockery, softened into a wonderful tenderness that was for her alone, of all human beings, and for all sick or helpless animals. But moved to anxiousness as now, never before. She clasped her hands across the fluttering of her heart. Geiger-Hans glanced at her again and laughed gently. The traveller's befrogged coat was loose at last, the column of his young throat bare, and the musician had slipped a hand between the folds of a shirt finer than the girl's own snowy bodice.

"Why, little Sidonia," said he, as if she was once again the child, "you look as scared as a rabbit in a trap. Dead, this lad? Nay, his English mother, whoever she was, has built him too well for that. Why, here's a heart for you! With decent luck, it should make him swing into his nineties as steadily as the drums of the Old Guard."

As he spoke, he shifted the burden of the languid head to a convenient pile of straw, sprang to his feet and stood laughing again.

"Our wits are not the strongest part of us," he mocked. "They're always like to be the first things we lose." His lips twisted as he glanced downward. "A knock on our pate, and it is all away with them."

"For shame, Geiger-Onkel!" cried the girl. The colour flamed into her face: upon the reaction of her relief, she was glad to find anger, else she must have burst into tears. She knelt down by her ungracious guest, and, on a nearer view, misgiving once more crept upon her. Her little hands hovered. "Oh, Onkel," she cried, "yet he looks like death!"

"Nay, satisfy yourself, then," said the fiddler, encouragingly; "women are all cousins, even to Mamzell Sidonia."

His tone seemed scornful, but there was something genial, something almost of hope and pleasure, in his eyes as he watched the maid bend over the comely youth, watched her lay a timid touch over his heart.

"It beats," said Sidonia, in a whisper, "it beats." She spoke as of a wonderful thing. A smile came like a dream across her face. Her touch lingered. "How strong!" she said.

"The heart of a young man should be strong," quoth the fiddler.

"And how steady," went on the girl.

And the fiddler answered: "Strength is waste without steadiness."

She crouched, looking up at him, the smile of wonder on her lips. Then she looked down again at the pale face.

"His heart beats beautifully, but when will he wake again?"

"It is to be hoped, not till to-morrow morning. And," added the other more gravely, "he must not be awaked. Nature knows what she is about, and she is rocking her young friend to the tune of her own remedy. Nay, never fear, little

mamzell, the lad is but stunned. He will sleep till morning, and wake scarce the worse. Leave him, child, he lies well enough."

"He lies very ill," flashed she. "You were kinder to the old white horse. A pillow he shall have," she scolded, and was gone on her light foot.

The wrangling sounds were now stilled within and without the forest house. The cries of the hounds had fallen into silence. As for the rhythmic hysterics of the travelling lady, they had given place to soft gurgles of laughter. These punctuated the more continuous rumble of a bass undertone; her window was evidently once more open to the night. The musician gazed down at the youth's upturned face.

"What dreams you could have had, you dog, had your foolish wits not taken leave of absence," he murmured. With an unconscious gesture he reached for his fiddle, as if to clothe the thought in its own tune. But he paused before touching a string. "No, sweet friend," he muttered, "thou must be put to baser uses before dawn. And till then thy fancies and mine must sleep."

A twig cracked sharply. With heavy tread, yet noiselessly, in her list slippers, the forest-mother waddled into the barn. There was the gleam of a white basin in her hand, whence arose a sour pungency.

"The good God and His holy mother preserve us this night!" she ejaculated in a creaking whisper. "I have brought a compress for the poor young gentleman's head. Eh, but the gracious one was haughty, and pride will have a fall! But there, my heart goes out to lads, be they high or low. Hey, jeminy," she clacked her tongue, "it's enough to give one a turn to see him lying there!"

Though the words were rueful the tone was almost cheery. She had been witness of many hard knocks in her day; and she knew—none better—the stuff of which solid Kerls are made.

"Keep your vinegar for little gherkins, mother," said the musician, gaily. "We want no more pickle here to-night."

Further gibing was silenced on his lips, for Sidonia came back upon them like a small whirlwind, clasping her pillow by the middle, heedless that one corner of it should knock off the fiddler's hat, the other all but upset the vinegar lotion. But her impetuosity gave place to fairy gentleness as she knelt beside Steven and drew his head into her lap, spreading meanwhile the pillow into its proper place.

"Save us and bless us!" exclaimed the forest-mother. "Sidonia! Here, Geiger-Onkel, take the vinegar!" And, quite flustered, she thrust her basin upon him.

"Foster-mother," said Sidonia, looking up rebukingly, "he must not be awakened." She laid her hand protectingly upon the crisp brown curls.

"But, child," groaned the forest-mother, "this is no work for a—no work for

you. *Himmel!* the strange gentleman's head on your lap; and you—what you are! It is not fitting. It is not maidenly!"

"Tscha!" said the fiddler, testily, and forced back the bowl upon the irate old woman. "Good mother, leave the child alone. See, she has laid the young gentleman's head quite prettily on the pillow, and now she is going straight to bed. It is late, for good children."

Sidonia had leaped to her feet. She came slowly towards the two who were watching her, tossing her head. But, with all her pride, she could not conceal that she was blushing to tears. Suddenly she darted past them into the night, and her feet could be heard pattering up the outside wooden stairs that led to her gable room.

CHAPTER IV
PARTING OF THE WAYS

"*Come like shadows, so depart.*"
{*Macbeth*}.

"Forest-mother," said the fiddler, dryly, "you know a great deal about sturdy forest lads, and you make the best pickles in the country: but you know nothing at all about little maids."

And, as the honest woman stared at him open-mouthed, he took her genially by the shoulders and turned her towards the door.

"Everything the child has done to-night has been right and becoming," he went on, half regretfully, half smilingly, "even because she was a child. But, mark me, from to-night she is child no longer. And all that her heart prompts her to do now will be wrong. Go to bed, mother," he added in a different tone; "and if you hear my fiddle speaking by-and-by and a rumble of carriage-wheels thereafter, why, turn you over on the other ear and think you have dreamed a strange dream."

On her limp slippers the forest-mother trotted a few steps forward, obediently; then she halted, hesitated, and turned back. Her shrewd, kindly face was all puckered in the moonlight.

"Geiger-Hans," she called solemnly. Her tone was so full of mystery and import that he came to her in two steps. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder

in the direction of the open window, whence the voice and the soft laughter still crept out upon the forest stillness. "Yonder—in there"—she whispered—"him!"

He interrupted her. "I know: I saw him come, little mother; and I have spoken with Friedel."

"He looked at her a great deal," she insisted.

"At whom? At little Sidonia?"

"Ay; and he took her by the chin."

"Did he so?" said Geiger-Hans. His low voice had a tremor of anger. Then he was silent; and the forest-mother stood waiting, her eyes confidently on him. A fantastic figure in the moonshine, yet this solid peasant woman seemed to leave her anxieties with confidence in his hands.

"I can rid you of your unexpected honours for to-night," said the vagrant musician at last. "But who can guard the fawn in the forest from the cunning hunter? Fritz must take back Mamzell Sidonia home before he goes his rounds to-morrow."

"And she only just come, and so happy, poor lamb!"

But she made no further protest, and went with her vinegar softly back to the house.

* * * * *

The fiddler returned to the barn, and cast once more a look at him who slept so deeply. Thence his light, long, striding step brought him to the shed where the patched coach stood. From its recesses he took the traveller's cloak, and, returning, cast it over the inanimate figure. And, having shifted the shade of the lantern, his restlessness took him back into the night. He was nursing his fiddle as he went.

"What things," he said, addressing it as the court fool of old his bauble (after that singular fashion which led people to call him crazy)—"what things, beloved, could we not converse upon to-night, were we not constrained by sinners? What a song of the call of the spring to last year's fawn—of the dream that comes to the dreamer but once in his life's day, and that before the dawn! Chaste and still as the night, and yet tremulous; shadows, mere shadows, and yet afire—voiceless, formless, impalpable, and yet something more lovely than all the sunshine can show, than all the beauty arms can hold hereafter, than all the music ears shall hear. A prescience not yet a presence, a yearning not yet a desire.... O youth! O love!" sighed the fiddler, and drew from his fiddle a long echo to the sigh. "But when we deal with rascals we must play rascally tunes."

The rapscallion air, to which poor Steven's wits had danced away from him, broke shrilly, almost indecently, upon the beautiful calmness of the midnight

hour.

Big Mr. Forester Schmidt, seated comfortably in mother Friedel's elbow-chair, his feet upon the table and a long glass of the straw-coloured wine at his elbow, was aroused from an agreeable somnolence by the sudden screech. Friedel, frankly asleep in a corner, woke with a start, and muttered a not ill-natured curse on the mad fiddler.

At the same time the door leading from the kitchen to the lady's parlour was quickly opened, and the head of Herr Inspector Meyer was thrust through the aperture. This gentleman's good-looking countenance seemed sadly discomfited, his airs of blatant importance shaken.

"*Diavolo*! ... Do you hear that?" he cried to his burly friend. "There it is again! I tell you it means something. It always means something! Remember Brest ... and remember Smolensk!"

"It means that I'll go and throttle him with his own catgut," cried Schmidt, letting his heavy-booted feet fall upon the floor with a stamp. "Look here, you fellow, you Friedel, here, with your gun, and let us see how you Germans can shoot! Down with that caterwauler ... and his Majesty will make you a present of the hide."

Friedel had gathered his sleepy carcase together upon the appearance of the inspector. He now stood very respectfully at attention. But there was nothing respectful in the small, fierce blue eyes he fixed upon Mr. Schmidt.

"May it please your Excellency," he began. But Mr. Meyer, interrupting him irritably, came down into the room, snapping his fingers, stamping his little feet.

"Hark, hark! Do you hear that?" he cried, and seized Schmidt by the arm. "I tell you, man, you are a fool. Will you say now that this is no warning, no menace? Hark!"

He flung up his head, and his own intentness of listening, something also of his mysterious agitation, seemed to communicate itself to his irate lieutenant. They stood holding their breath; and bewildered Friedel hearkened too.

The fiddler's mocking tune had merged into another theme. The night was vibrating to a deeper sonority, a more noble rhythm. Friedel thought he must be still dreaming, for he seemed suddenly to see serried ranks of soldiers marching down a dusty road, tall fellows, with hollow, tanned cheeks and towering bearskins, their long white legs swinging by him as they tramped. It was not the thin sound of strings that was in his ears, but the bugle's call and the rattle of drums.

"Thunder! It is the chaunt of the Old Guard!" He was scarce aware he had spoken aloud, until the inspector caught up his words in a high key of excitement.

"There," he cried, turning with a sort of feminine frenzy upon his friend, "even that blockhead hears it! I tell you, General, we must out of this. And the

woman must go too. 'Tis his will, the big tyrant."

He paused for a moment; and then resumed, well-nigh dancing in his exasperation:

"The carriage, the carriage at once! D'Albignac! Leave that gun alone!" he shrieked. "I won't have the fellow touched. Last time, last time——" he paused again and shook his head.

"I dare not," he said in a low voice. "It is not wholesome!"

* * * * *

Steven opened heavy eyes and stared vacantly at the creeping light, indigo between the wisps of yellow straw; at the large square of shimmering mists and flickering leaves where the barn door stood open to the dawn. He turned his head and found that it lay on a fragrant linen pillow, and also that it ached vaguely in spite of this luxury.

A vulgar, absurd tune was still dancing in his brain. Then he caught within his range of vision the figure of a man sitting cross-legged, putting a fresh string to a fiddle. And memory came back slowly.

"It was the fault of the music, you know," he said.

Geiger-Hans shot a look at him from under his quizzical eyebrows.

"You never got that kiss in after all."

"Ah, but I got in my slap!"

The young man sat up, quite inspirited by the recollection, and discovered that, with the exception of some dizziness and stiffness, there was nothing much amiss with him.

"But some one very nearly got his hunting-knife into you," said Geiger-Hans, dryly, "and there would have been an end of your learning to be young. Nevertheless, you have capabilities—yes, some capabilities." He wound up his string, twanged it, and nodded over it.

A cock crew in the forest farmyard. A robin was singing somewhere amid a babel of chirping birds. The breeze, balm-scented, flew straight in from the pines and fanned Stephen's head and throat. He lifted his hand to his open shirt and looked inquiringly at the musician, who nodded again.

"You were stunned by the fall," said Geiger-Hans, "with that brute on the top of you. Fortunate for you that I caught his hand at the right moment! And thereupon the little man, the Herr Inspector, you know, ran out screaming, 'No bloodshed, d'Albignac!' ... It is his one good point: he is merciful of life."

"The little man? ... D'Albignac?" Steven echoed the words in wonder.

"You measured his cheek charmingly—I mean d'Albignac's," said the fiddler. "We two might do great things together yet. Ay, that was the d'Albignac.

I dare say you have heard the name, in Cassel. Chouan once, then renegade, now Grand-Veneur (and Great Pandar) to his Majesty of Westphalia. Such is d'Albignac."

"Majesty? ... King Jerome?"

"Did you think," said Geiger-Hans, compassionately, "that Meyer and Schmidt were usual names for Frenchmen? Why, the precious *incognito* would not have deceived a cat."

The dawn was growing softly outside, but there was sudden vivid light in Steven's brain.

"Then—then," he stammered, struggling to his feet—"the lady——"

"The lady, my poor young friend, is naught but a dancing girl from Genoa, whom that wise and powerful man, the Emperor Napoleon, sent two emissaries to remove—it is not the first time he has had to attend to such matters—from her charming apartments in 'Napoleonshöhe,' where her presence conduced neither to the King's dignity, nor to the Queen's. The great Napoleon is mighty particular about her Westphalian Majesty's dignity. Our ardent little sovereign, however, determined to snatch a last meeting; hence the romantic attack and rescue—the casual meeting!"

"O Lord!" said Steven, and passed his hand across his mouth, as if the shadow of the yearned-for kiss polluted it.

"And so that Meyer fellow is——"

"Our brother Jerome—yes."

The fiddler lifted a sweet, worn voice, while his bow danced lightly on the strings and chanted to the absurd lilt—

"*Nous allons chercher un royaume*
Pour not' p'tit frère Jérome."

"'Twas the song of the soldiers before Jena," he explained. "*Pardi!* a taking ragamuffin tune! When our friends last night heard it, comrade, they took to their heels."

And as Steven stared with ever-increasing wonder, Geiger-Hans proceeded, in his mocking voice:

"'The wicked flee when none pursueth!' If there is one person the kinglet here is afraid of, 'tis of the great Emperor. Many a merry prank have I played on King Jerome's nerves! He holds to his high gilt throne, and knows that the mighty hand that placed him on it can pick him off it again. Big brother, on his side, knows how to punish too, when little brother passes the bounds. And the small man thinks the big man has spies on him at every corner. He has his

own way of knowing things, has Cæsar ... if not the ways yonder gingerbread monarch fancies."

"And he thought you were the Emperor's spy?" hazarded Steven, and looked with some doubt at his companion. A mystery the man certainly was!

"Many things have I been, comrade," said the fiddler, answering the look, "but never in any man's pay, be assured of that. Nevertheless, the Kingmaker keeps an eye on his puppets from the midst of victory—many eyes on him, indeed. And Jerome has taken into his head that your humble servant is the most cunning of Napoleon's eyes. The mistake is amusing enough, and I make it serve my own use at times. I had but to play such a simple air, you see, and his Majesty of Westphalia—his choice circle——" He made a wide gesture and a sound mimicking a flutter of wings: "Phew! Gone, scared like frightened sparrows!"

"Gone?" echoed Steven; and though she was but a dancing-girl from Genoa, and a baggage at that, his heart sank.

"Gone," said the fiddler—"gone before the dawn. So is Sidonia! Aha, Sir Count, short skirts, it seems to you, make the peasant, and fine jewels, no doubt, the great lady! Ha, ha! to see your lordship draw away from the touch of her tresses! She brought you her own pillow last night, and wept over you and thought you were dead—till I bid her put her hand over your heart and feel its solid beating. 'Tis a noble child—and a greater race you will never meet in your travels. Why, 'tis the heiress of the country. Oh, there were no lies about her! The girl visits her foster-mother for a holiday and a treat now and then. You never looked at her foot or her delicate eyebrow: she was but a peasant girl, *pardi*! Jerome has a keener eye——"

"Jerome!" echoed Steven, and, he knew not why, the fiercest spasm of anger he had yet felt seized him then.

"Jerome pinched her chin, as you saw," said the fiddler, "and, therefore, back we packed her, Friedel and I, to her own castle, for safety.... Meanwhile you slept. Come, come, never look so downcast," he went on with sudden change of tone. "Is it not instructive to know how the ruler of Westphalia passes his time while all the best manhood of his country is warring for the Empire—burnt in Spain, frozen in Russia? And, at any rate, have you not had a night you will remember out of all your dull, regulated youth? Come forth and I will show you something I warrant me you have never seen before—sunrise in the forest."

The yard seemed very silent and empty. They were all gone—gone like a dream!

"Come," said the musician, "look up. Have you ever seen so limpid a blue? Look at the trees enveloped in mystery; see the silver shine of the dew over every blade; hark to it as it drips from leaf to leaf. 'Tis every day a new creation! Oh, I could make you Dawn-music, if there were not such music already for you to

hear! Hark to the whispering, the lisping, the murmurs! Do you mark the birds—that is your last night's robin at the top of the larch tree; he is singing under his breath now, watching the horizon; he will pipe when the sun leaps up. Do you hear the humming of the bees? There is thyme in mother Friedel's garden; and that is the sharp tinkle of the brook over the stones. Eh, my soul, what a symphony! The breath of the forest—do you feel it?—cool and living; the savour of the crushed, dew-drenched moss under your feet—do you taste it? And the smell of the beech leaves and the incense of the pines? And now watch. Behold how the forest is lit up as with some inner fire! Dark and colourless stand the trees nearest to us. Look within, how the flame grows, how it spreads—live gold, live emerald! And see there—oh, the scarlet on those fir trunks! The sun has risen!..."

The fiddler stopped speaking. Looking back upon it, Steven afterwards wondered if he had spoken at all, or had only made his thoughts felt. But here his strange companion came to a standstill in their slow wandering and took off his battered old hat and waved it.

"Farewell!" said he. "Mother Friedel will give you breakfast, and son Friedel is already on the look-out for your lost retinue. Farewell, noble Count ... remember to be young!"

"Shall I never meet you again?" cried Steven, suddenly. His heart sank unaccountably, and he added with hesitation: "Comrade?"

Geiger-Hans, moving away into the forest with light, fantastic step, paused and smiled mysteriously.

"Who knows?" said he, over his shoulder. "If you know how to seek—why—who knows?"

He plunged down an opening in the trees, where the sun made a golden path before him through the yellowing oak trees; and the larches on either side were on fire with green flame.

CHAPTER V
THE INVITATION OF THE ROAD

"A vagrant's morning wide and blue,
In early fall, when the wind walks, too;
A lengthening highway, cool and brown,

Alluring up and enticing down...."
BLISS CARMAN.

There never yet had been question of a maiden in the life of Steven Lee, up to this September day. With his Austrian tradition, Austrian pride of race and estate, he had some very clear notions of the noble blood and the territorial importance that would have to be hers who should be honoured some day as the choice of Waldorff-Kielmansegg.

Yet your young patrician, as a rule, is not chary of granting himself that interlude of amusement, dissipation—experience of life before marriage—commonly known as "sowing his wild oats." It was, perhaps, because of his English education, hearty, wholesome, sporting; by reason too, no doubt, of the English deliberation inherited from his mother, joined to his own fastidious self-sufficiency, that he had never felt the want of a woman's share in his life. The pretty chin of a peasant girl had never tempted his fingers. Little Sidonia of the forest house, had she been ten times more beautiful, had never needed to wield her plaits as flails to beat down his enterprise. Had not the fiddler's music got into his veins, that strange night; had not the insidious white wine mounted to his head, he had surely never succumbed so rapidly to the fascination of the young Italian. Yet her chief attraction, in his eyes, had been, not the parted, dewy lips, not the violet gaze of her eyes, but the false attribution to her of birth and breeding, born of his own imagination. The moonlight kiss he had suddenly yearned for was to have been snatched from a great lady—faugh! not from a *ballerina*! Here had, indeed, been a lesson, a humiliation—all the more deep-felt because the punishment seemed disproportionate to the single lapse. His mind went back to it sullenly, once and again. There were men, he knew, to whom the true character of the fair traveller would have been an additional allurement. He was not of them.

His fastidiousness revolted, almost as a woman's might, no less from the thought of any inferiority of status, than from the knowledge that where he condescended to favour, others had already carried their easy victories.

Yet, although the image of the dancer lingered no more pleasantly in his fancy than did that of the little patrician—disdainfully unnoticed in her peasant garb—that night of adventure in the forest had left a deep stamp upon the young man; but the chief memory for him, the one personality towards which his thoughts constantly reverted, was that of the grey-haired roadside fiddler. He had met a king yonder night, but it was the vagrant he longed to see again. He had fought for his life with one of the most notorious rufflers in Europe, but the scenes he re-lived, with the fond dalliance of a slow-thinking youth, was the

meeting on the road in the rosy sunset and the parting in the green forest dawn. He was haunted by the man's smile, by his voice, by the way of his hands—above all, his music.

The taunting music, with its yearning, its suggestion, ever alluring and ever elusive, played to him by night and day. It seemed as if he should come to his old self again, could he but encounter that strange companion once more and test the emptiness of his fascination, the folly and absurdity of it! At least, this was what he told himself, to excuse his own inconceivable action. For here was he actually ranging the country, in search of what? A sort of fiddling vagabond. A fellow, moreover, who had rated his nobility at such insolent cheapness; had slighted him; had mocked, chided; had treated him as no one, since childhood, had presumed to treat the important young nobleman.

But it was an obsession: idle to try and reason it away. No, he would never rest till his desire was accomplished.

So he wandered along the Thuringian ways, making stealthy inquiries here and there; fruitlessly, but always lured on from village to village, round and about the great forest district, where, he was credibly informed, the fiddler was wont to roam about this time of year; constantly met with the tidings that, but the day before, but last night, but two hours ago, the wanderer had been seen to pass along that very road. The gracious gentleman would surely catch him on the highway to Helmstadt; at the farmhouse of Grönfeld, where he always lingered; at the fair in the next hamlet, where he was absolutely promised! Sometimes it seemed as if the very trail of his music hung in the air; there was something fantastic in the constant presence, always escaping him.

Steven, fully conscious of the absurdity of the situation, set his teeth in still more dogged determination, as the days went by. And the pursuit, started at first half idly, now became a thing of earnestness, a chase almost passionate.

"I told Geiger-Hans about the fine young nobleman that was always looking for him," called out a sunburnt girl one morning, as he passed for the second time through her green-embowered village.

Steven halted. He was on foot, after his fashion, tired with his fruitless tramp, out of temper.

"That was very kind of you," retorted he, sarcastically. "And what said the fellow?"

The girl's teeth flashed in her tanned face. She poised her bucket on the rim of the well, and shrugged her shoulder archly.

"Geiger-Hans said to me," she giggled: "'If one wants to be followed, one must first retire—remember that, Mädel,' he said. He said that to me," she went on, "because of the lad I'm after."

Steven turned away with a "pish!" of scorn for such low dallying, and an

uneasy sense of doubt that the fiddler's avoidance of him was deliberate. As he swung away from her, the girl called after him good-naturedly:

"If the gracious gentleman will go to Wellenshausen, he will surely find Geiger-Hans sooner or later. He is never far from the Burg, this time of year."

"Pah!" thought Steven, "shall I waste more time in running down this beggar? The folk here-abouts must think me as crazy as himself! They are all in league to make me tramp. I vow this is some trick of the vagabond. I think I see myself squatting at a wretched village, humbly waiting Master Fiddler's pleasure."

And yet, to Wellenshausen, he next day found his way.

Thus Steven Lee, Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg, a young man of usually epicurean tastes, chose to linger in God-forsaken, out-of-the-way corners of Westphalia, this September in the year of wars, 1813.

In the eyes of his valet this was incomprehensible; seriously annoying; indeed, a matter for much head-shaking. Instead of making for the gay capital of King Jerome and enjoying himself "like a gentleman," he hung about the outskirts of the Thuringian Forest and haunted the inns of half-deserted townships, of poverty-stricken villages on the high imperial road. While the postilions and the above-mentioned valet cursed the thin wine and the gross fare, while the horses of the travelling-chaise fretted the hours away in unworthy stables, their lord and master took solitary rambles on foot, as if in search of no one knew what, only to return, haughty as usual, weary and discontented.

When a halt was ordered for the night in the hamlet of Wellenshausen, instead of pushing on to the decent town of Halberstadt, as he had expected, valet Franz felt the situation more than his lively Viennese spirit could endure and vowed he would resign. He tapped his forehead significantly as his master strolled out of the vine-grown guest-house, looking up and down the street in his singular, expectant fashion.

"There's question of a maiden," said postilion Peter, grimacing over his mug, "or else the devil's in it."

Further than this their diagnosis of the master's state of mind could not go.

* * * * *

Albeit on the skirt of the low lands, the village of Wellenshausen was yet still of the mountain. It rode, so to speak, a bold buttress of the distant wooded range, and was sheltered to the north by an imposing crag, that rose, pinnacle-like, so detached and huge that it would have seemed inaccessible but for the testimony

of the castle perched on its summit—the far-famed Burg of Wellenshausen. From the flank of this mount, a torrent of black waters, strangely cold at all times, born in some mysterious and dreaded cavern of the rocks, rushed, foaming brown; and, on its way to the plain, cut the village in two.

Steven Lee gazed upwards at the old Burg, frowning of aspect at most times, but just now, as it caught on its narrow windows the rays of a sinking sun, shining rosily upon the valleys. His fancy was wafted up for a moment to the height on a wing of airy romance, when a clamour of children's voices turned his attention in a new direction. A string of ragged urchins was rushing in the direction of the torrent. Over the bridge a man's figure was approaching at a swinging pace. It stopped for a moment on the summit of the rough stone arch; and the notes of a fiddle, in lively measure, rose above the children's shouts and the roar of the waters. Dancing, singing, leaping, catching at his coattails, they surrounded the musician and followed him. He advanced like the magic piper of the legend.

Steven stood still in the middle of the way; a gleam in his eye, the sunset radiance on his smiling face. The player came up to him and greeted him with a bow, his fiddle still at his chin the while he finished his stave.

"Good evening, my lord Count. We have met before," said he. His tone was placidly courteous, if his glance mocked.

"And I well-nigh despaired of our meeting again," returned the young man, with some show of emotion. "Your music has been running in my head—implacably—all these days. I think you must have bewitched me!"

There was a note almost of reproach in his voice; and yet he blushed as he spoke, ashamed of his own eagerness in such a quarter.

"Why," said the other, cruelly, "I fear you're but a dull lad. Great Apollo, could we change places, I would need no old man's company!—Nay, now, children, let a gentleman speak to a gentleman." He paused in a moment's meditation, looked through the inn gateway, then glanced up swiftly at the distant towering strong house. "Is it possible your lordship has chosen this barren village for a stage? I see your attendants supping—right sadly—in the arbour yonder. Will you bid me to supper also, comrade?"

He looped his threadbare sleeve into Steven's fine broadcloth. The urchins shouted with laughter.

The young aristocrat frowned, started; then, with sudden sweetness, submitted, and presently found himself sitting in front of his guest in the darkening bin room, to the respectful astonishment of mine host of "The Three Storks." Had the grinding struggle for existence, in such precarious war times, left a spark of imagination in the few plain wits with which Nature had gifted this honest man, he might have found something beyond mere amazement in the contrast between his two patrons—something of the old romance of which the German

roads had once been full, before the cruel realities of foreign subjection, the flat prose of poverty, had driven legend and fancy from the land.

The fiddler's attire had more pretensions to neatness than on that other sunset hour when Steven had first met him, bare-breasted to the evening airs and powdered with the dust of the long way. His garments were distinctive enough, for all their poverty, and set off the fine line, the close muscle, of a figure lean to emaciation yet a model of alert strength. Breeches of home-spun clung to thigh and knee; thick knitted hose and brass-buckled shoes of country make could not conceal the elegance of leg and foot. The shirt-collar carelessly open, the abundant grey hair, quaintly tied up in the cue of twenty years bygone, emphasized a symmetry of head and throat which, in a higher walk of life, would doubtless have been termed noble. The tan of the clear-cut, ascetic face was singular against the silver of the hair. The whole personality was indeed made of anomalies:—the wild fire of the eyes under brows melancholy and philosophic; the air at once of recklessness and of self-command, of indifference and fierceness; the geniality and the illimitable scorn; the weariness of all things, the utter worn distaste which was written in every line of his countenance and might have belonged to the pitiless disillusion of old age; the swift energy of the delicate impulsive hands, the quick turn of the head and the flashing glance which made him half as young again at times than that middle-age which yet was unmistakably his. Here was a creature who seemed to know too much and to despise everything; who read the yet unspoken thought, and did not hide his scorn of it; who yet drew confidence as a woman might, and could lay his touch on the sources of tears and laughter. If angels or demons walked in human guise, this Geiger-Hans might have passed for one or the other, according to the mood of his company or according, rather, to the candour of their souls.

Against so strange a being the personality of his young entertainer stood clear as light of day. No mystery there! Four words could sum it up: pride, youth, strength, and comeliness.

The innocence of his youth looked out through his full grey eyes; the pride of his birth sat on his eyebrow, drooped in his eyelid, quivered in his nostrils; the joy of his untried strength smiled unconsciously in his red lips; there was life in the very wave of his brown hair. The healthy pallor of the cheek only emphasized how generous was the quick blood, and how ingenuous the nature that sent it rushing with every passing emotion. Scarcely conscious yet of the value of the power he wielded, the young man nevertheless gave his orders in careless tones, as one to whom wealth had always been an attribute of existence. The sober richness of his garb, the sable of the travelling cloak that hung over his chair, became his youthful nobility. And there he sat and pressed the vagrant musician to sour wine and harsh fare with the airs of a magnate at his own luxurious table.

The fiddler was unwontedly silent. He had assumed, in his sardonic way, an attitude of exceeding propriety. He addressed mine host and his unkempt daughter mincingly; so that, between laughter, wonder, and a little fear, their service became complicated. And Steven, feeling himself subtly mocked, felt the scarlet burn in his cheeks, but became only the grander and the more high-born, because of his own embarrassment.

Yet, now and again, the musician's gaze would rest upon his entertainer not unkindly. Nay, more, there was pleasure, almost caress, in the look with which the bright eyes would sweep from Count Steven's blushing face down the long limbs that still held the grace and something of the delicacy of adolescence in spite of their unmistakable vigour.

The slattern girl put a dish of hard green pears between the two, with a slam. The fiddler raised melancholy orbs upon Steven:

"Well, sir," he said, "I cannot congratulate you. The bread is sour. Sour is not the word for the wine. It is scarcely of such stuff that our Ovid sang in his 'Art of Love'—

"'Vina parant animos, faciuntque caloribus aptos.'

I have good teeth, but truly this sausage baffled them. I am unappeased." He struck his lean middle. "I shall have no spirit to play another note to-night. (Keep your curses for better uses, friend; they will not sweeten the cup.) Now," said he, luxuriously stretching out his legs and gazing at them with a musing air, "I could have done with a capon, methinks, and a beaker of ripe old Burgundy. What say you? Have *you* supped? Nay? Neither have I. Come, Sir Count, I invite your High Seriousness to an entertainment where nothing short of the best cellar and the fairest lady of the countryside will satisfy us." Then, regarding Steven's bewildered face for a while in silence, he went on with sudden earnestness. "The highborn English lady and the estimable Austrian nobleman, who are jointly responsible (as I understand) for your existence, have spoilt the dish for want of a little spice. Heavens, sir! have you never a smile in you, never a spark for the humorous side of things? Why, youth should itself be the laughter of life. Come with me—you have much to learn."

And leaving the pears further unheeded, he took the young man by the arm and led him to the door. The village was now steeped in grey shadow, but the strong house on the height still glowed like a ruby. Pointing to it:

"I brought you once," said the vagrant, "into somewhat low company. That was the story of our first meeting. To-night, if you will, I shall bring you into high."

"O Jemine!" exclaimed the landlord, who had been hanging open-mouthed,

ready for the roar at Geiger-Hans' humour. "Yonder, where the Lord Burgrave locks up his lady?"

"Even so," said the hungry fiddler, imperturbably. "And you must lend your donkey and little Georgi, and see that this gentleman's valise is safely conveyed upwards. For yonder we spend the night."

Yonder, where the sullen lord of the district reigned in traditional terror, even in absence; where (it was whispered) he had immured a six-months' bride—jealous as any Bluebeard. Yonder in the old Burg, where ancient horrible legends of fierce dogs to devour unwelcome guests, of bottomless oubliettes, of rayless dungeons, of torture chambers (no doubt based on truth enough in bygone centuries), still lived in significance with tenants and vassals. Nay, was it not well known that none were allowed ingress or egress to the castle but the Baroness Sidonia, the Burgrave's niece, who had lived all her life with him and, being of his own blood, and little better than a child, could not be said to count? The innkeeper looked doubtfully at Geiger-Hans, compassionately at his guest. Vague memories flitted through his mind of some fantastic tale, heard to the murmurous accompaniment of his mother's spinning wheel, wherein the devil met ingenuous youths on their wanderings and tempted them to their doom.

All knew, of course, that the musician was a man of humour; still, the freak seemed beyond a joke. And yet, on an imperial gesture, the host of "The Three Storks" withdrew without further parley to carry out the crazy vagrant's order.

"Don't make a fool of me," whispered Steven, in his singular adviser's ear.

"Why, it is the wisdom of youth to be foolish and it is its privilege to be foolish with grace.—O, could you but learn that!" interrupted the other, impatiently. "No, not to-night, dear children, but to-morrow ... to-morrow you shalt dance your feet off. I am a great person to-night: I am supping in the old Burg."

"Oh!" said the children, who had gathered like sparrows on their fiddler's reappearance. "Oh!" And awestruck they scattered.

"That Geiger-Hans...!" said the landlord, as by-and-by he watched his guests depart. "He bewitches all, great and small. But this is a strong one.... There they go. Maybe they'll never come back!" He had to the utmost the village terror of the menace of the Burg, inherited through centuries of high and low justice dispensed by Burgraves of Wellenshausen. "Dungeons, up there, and trapdoors, and none ever the wiser. *Herr Jemine*!"

CHAPTER VI

Wellenshausen

THE BURG

"I will be master of what is my own;
She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house;
And here she stands, touch her whoever dare!"
(*Taming of the Shrew*).

"Sidonia," said the lady up in the turret-room, "I will not endure it!"

As this remark was made at least five times a day, the hearer was less impressed than the desperate air of the speaker demanded.

"I will throw myself from the window," continued the Burgravine, carefully propping her plump elbows on the stone sill to gaze down with safety.

"If you'd only come out sometimes, and walk with me!" said little Sidonia, smiling.

"Walk, child? Your uncle knew well what he was doing when he stuck me up on this diabolic crag. I have not a pair of shoes that would last me half-way down. And merely to look at the road that leads to this place! Oh!"—she covered her eyes with her hand and shuddered—"it makes me reel with giddiness!"

"It was very lovely in the forest," said Sidonia. "The wild raspberries are nearly ripe, and——"

"Raspberries! Alas! is that what you ought to think of at your age? You, too—'tis monstrous cruelty!"

"The fawns are growing and are so sweet——"

"Fawns! Fawns? 'Tis a lover should be sweet to you. As for me—oh woe!"

Sidonia, slight, slim, and sun-kissed as a young woodland thing herself, grew crimson behind her aunt's dejected head.

"Why—why, then, does Uncle Ludovic keep us here?" she queried.

Uncle Ludovic's lady flounced round in her chair, her eyes darting flames, a flood of words rising to her cherry lips—

"Why? Because, my love, the creature is a *Barbe-Bleue*. And to be a Bluebeard, child, means that if a wretched woman has been fool enough to trust you, you think you have a right to chop her head off if she disobeys; and meanwhile to shut her up to prevent her having so much as a chance."

"I wonder why you married Uncle Ludo?" mused the girl. Her eyes were dreaming, across the fair plain-land, into the distance. To give your life to some one quite old and quite stout, with a grizzled double chin and veins that swell on a red forehead (ran the fleeting thought), when, about the ways of the forest, a young knight might be met wandering ... a knight with hair that crisped back from forehead of ivory, with eyes that were scornful and full of fire!

"Why did I marry him?" returned the Burgravine, sharply. "Ah, he was very different then, my dear! The monster! how he deceived me! Do you think I should ever have consented if I had not known that he was King Jerome's minister; if he had not promised me that we should live at Cassel; if I had not been told that one was more gay at Cassel now than at Paris itself? And honourably I was served, was I not? Ten days at Cassel, while there was scarce a cat stirring, the King called away by the Emperor, then snatched off to this place, this bald, hateful eagle's crag, at the first hint of any gaiety. Men talk of their honour, my love—a big word behind which they can play any trick upon us poor women their humour may prompt." Her voice broke shrilly. Then she added, with sudden calmness: "And if I had had a silver groschen to my name, you may imagine 'tis not old Wellenshausen's second wife that I should be—but some fine young man's first one. Sidonia, how unfair is fate!" She looked enviously at the girl. "There are you, with all your money, who will never have a suitable notion of what to do with it, while I—I——" She snapped two taper fingers together sharply and twisted a dear little plump shoulder well-nigh free of the fashionable Viennese robe, which looked so oddly out of place in the mediæval severity of the tower room.

There was silence, while Sidonia reflected. The Burgravine had a way of opening strange perspectives before the young mind that had hitherto known but the simplest and straightest outlook on life. Wonderful customs had the new mistress brought to the old Burg—odd fads of fashion, new hours of meals, new liveries and unknown demands on the servants' attention. A prisoner, she assumed supreme authority within the limits of her prison. It sometimes seemed as if the very stones in the old wall were echoing surprise. Sidonia, who had run wild within them, near seventeen years of happy unexacting childhood, found herself frequently marvelling at a code of morality so startling in its novelty as to range beyond her judgment. She felt that she could as little fit herself to this new aunt's view of existence, as her modest country limbs to one of those outrageous garments of Viennese mode, over which the Burgravine could sigh a

whole morning through in rapture and regret—lamenting, with the voluble aid of Mademoiselle Eliza, her French maid, the opportunities lost in this God-forsaken corner of the world.

"And pray," said Bluebeard's wife, after a pause (never a very long one with her, for, if Sidonia had the gift of silence which belongs to all creatures who have lived much with nature, her Aunt Betty possessed it not at all), "and pray, how many days is it since your uncle took the road for Cassel, a-bursting with hypocritical sighs of farewell?"

"I don't know," said Sidonia, starting from her dream. "Ten days?"

"Ten days!" The words were echoed in a high pitch of indignation.

"Three weeks, then," amended the girl, hastily. "I really don't know; time goes so fast."

"Time goes so fast! Oh, you—you...!" Cherry lips of scorn babbled vainly in search of fitting epithet. "You—you're his own niece!"

Yet as life would have been distinctly duller were she to quarrel outright with Sidonia, the Burgravine quickly turned the batteries of her wrath to the old direction.

"Little did I think on that day, when my father, away in our dear Austrian home, bade me hasten to the great salon and pour out coffee for the gentleman from Hanover who had come to buy our horses—little did I think what lay in store for me! 'You must smile on him, child,' said my mother; 'he is an old nobleman, very rich; and if your father sells well, it may mean a month in Vienna for you!' Ach, heavens!" said the Burgravine, "think of me, my Sidonia, smiling, in my innocence, on him—on him! And who was bought and sold? It was poor Betty!"

"I think it is very wrong of Uncle Ludo," asserted Sidonia, severely, a flush rising to her sunburnt cheek. "Why, since he has married you, will he not trust you?"

"Why? Because, having spent most of his life studying our sex, the man now flatters himself upon a wide experience of our frailties. Because, having so often proved how easy it is to break the marriage vow, he can put no confidence in another's keeping it. Because," and her bosom heaved with indignation, "Cassel is the most amusing spot at this moment in the whole of Europe—they say it is gayer than Paris itself—and no husband who respects himself can take his pleasure with any comfort, if he does not feel that his wife is correspondingly bored."

"But uncle has his Chancellor's duty," resumed Sidonia, after pondering upon these enlightening remarks.

"Chancellor's duties!" The lady drummed on the diamond panes. "Oh, yes, my love, King Jerome requires onerous duties of his ministers, and I've no doubt that Ludovic performs his *con amore*.—How soon will you be eighteen?" she cried suddenly.

"In four months," said Sidonia.

"Four months—an eternity! Alas, my love, long before that I shall have been laid in that hateful chapel of yours; in that very vault, no doubt, where lies my predecessor—that fool of a woman who resisted such a life as this for twenty years, and yet had the inconceivable want of tact to die at the very moment when I was ripe to fall a prey to the monster."

"Poor Aunt Hedwige!" said Sidonia, reflectively; "she was very fat and never unkind, and I don't think she was unhappy."

"Ha!" muttered the Burgravine, vindictively, "I'll warrant he might have brought her to Cassel with impunity."

"He didn't, though," said Sidonia.

"No, child," pursued the other, with much rancour, "woman's place is at home, you see, while the man is abroad—aha!" She set her teeth and growled behind them like an angry Persian kitten. Then she snapped at her niece: "And you haven't even the intelligence to be eighteen yet, and be of some use for once in your life! Yes, never look so astonished; you're not a fool, child; you know that when you are eighteen, you will be free, and the richest woman in Thuringia—owner of half the wretched little province; free, girl, free to do as you like, to live where you like, to have your own establishment, to spend your own money—and then there'd be a chance for me! Ah, but you would not give it to me. You would let dear uncle manage as he's always managed, and dole you out a thaler here and a louis there, and let him choose you a nice husband ... who would not look too much into the accounts, I'll warrant."

"Aunt Betty!" panted Sidonia. The Burgravine stopped, slightly abashed by the fire that flashed in the child's glance. "If you can't forgive Uncle Ludo for being your husband, don't forget that he is a man of honour...."

"Oh, patatata!" said the lady, with a shrug, "here's mighty fine talk! Manage your own affairs, my dear. I'll say no more."

She leaned her plump arms on the window-sill again and turned her back on her niece with an air of determined sullenness.

Sidonia was very angry. She sat down on the high-backed chair and set the ancient spinning wheel whirring with a hand that trembled.

"One thing is certain," she resumed in a choked voice, "if I ever do marry, Aunt Betty, I shall choose my own husband."

"Of course, among the crowds that besiege the gay Burg of Wellenshausen, up in the clouds, my sweet creature," said the Burgravine, without turning her head, "you will have only *l'embarras du choix* and then——" But here she interrupted herself with a sharp ejaculation. Her fingers ceased their angry tune. She swung back the window a trifle wider and leaned out further than she had ventured upon her threat of suicide. "Look, look!" she cried in altered tones. "Do

you see? There are two men coming up the road with a pack-horse. No, 'tis a donkey!"

"Look, look, do you see? . . . There are two men coming up the road with a pack-horse. No, 'tis a donkey."

"Look, look, do you see? ... There are two men coming up the road with a pack-horse. No, 'tis a donkey."

Sidonia sprang up and leaned out eagerly across her aunt's shoulder. They were but a pair of children of different ages, when all was said and done.

"It can only be the miller's boy and the gardener ... or the shepherd," opined she.

"Oh, yes, the very outline of humpback John and the swing of bandy Peperl!" (This was sarcastic.) "To the hangman with these evening mists! Now, now, see! a gentleman, or I'm a goose-girl ... a young man, or I'm a grandmother!

Poor things, how they toil!"

"Why, 'tis Geiger-Hans!" exclaimed the lady's niece, in amazement. But it was not, surely, the sight of Geiger-Hans which brought such crimson to her cheek.

"And who may Geiger-Hans be?" cried the Burgravine.

"My dear friend, everybody's friend, Geiger-Hans the roadside player," said the girl. "Why, you have heard me speak of him many a time. If he were young and wore a plume and a dagger, people would call him a minnesinger. And his music—ah! it moves the heart like——"

"Why, the creature's a beggar, child!" interrupted the lady, peering down. "But the other——"

She drew back from the window in great fluster. "It's quite clear that you and I have company at last. Oh, for once I will be mistress here! They shall be admitted, *maugré* my ogre! Call Eliza! Get you into a decent gown, for Heaven's sake! My rose taffeta—it shall be my rose taffeta. And you?—Wear anything but white at your peril!"

CHAPTER VII
GUESTS OF CHANCE

"'Twould be a wildish destiny
If we, who thus together roam
In a strange land and far from home,
Were in this place the Guests of Chance!
Yet who would stop or fear to advance...?"
WORDSWORTH.

"The Lord Burgrave is not at the castle. The gracious Lady Burgravine never receives visitors."—Thus Martin the gatekeeper, thrusting his ugly head out of the *vasistas* of the great nail-studded door.

The last of the sunlight had faded. Grey and sheer rose the Burg walls and turrets above the visitors' heads; sheer and grey fell the mountainside away at their feet.

"Mark now, comrade, for here are we back in the Middle Ages," whispered

Geiger-Hans to his companion. Aloud he cried to the porter, who was slowly withdrawing his countenance: "Half a minute, friend, and let us examine your statement. That the Lord Burgrave is away, I am aware; but that your lady does not receive has still to be proved. How if we two come upon the invitation of His Excellency himself? Consider me that."

Through the gathering gloom Steven peered at the musician's mocking features. Martin the doorward stared in silence for a moment; then, with a great groaning of bars and grinding of keys, set the heavy door ajar—not to admit them, indeed, but that he might stare the closer.

"Martin," pursued the fiddler, gravely, "your name had better have been Thomas: you were born an unbeliever."

"My orders are," said Martin, in surly tones, "to admit no one."

"Fellow," said the fiddler, "a servant's orders, I take it, are not like the Ten Commandments, but subject to variations according to another's pleasure. What if I tell you that, knowing your master——"

"You? Know my master!" The doorward's teeth showed like an old dog's in a grin, half scorn, half doubt.

"Aye, we have but recently parted. By the same token, friend, he is now at Halberstadt and may be here to-morrow. Meanwhile, as it is damp and night falls, admit us to your stone hall and let us sit, for you will be wise to gaze at us a while longer before you take upon yourself to drive off the lord Burgrave's friend and the lady Burgravine's kinsman from doors to which they have been invited. Look at that gentleman. There is a gentleman for you, from the crown of his noble head to the sole of his high-born foot! And look at me! Ah, you know me! Geiger-Hans, am I not? Beware, Martin, great people have their disguises."

Martin showed signs of agitation and yielding. Geiger-Hans, keeping him under the raillery of his glance, pursued his argumentative advantage:

"Now, cease scratching that grey stubble, and I will tell thee what to do to save thee from a false step. Go thou to the gracious lady, and ask her if her lord has not advised her of the probable visit of two travellers, and request of her whether (these two gentlemen having presented themselves) it is not her wish, in obedience to her lord, that they should be admitted. Meanwhile, we shall sit on this bench, and I shall beguile my noble companion's weariness with a little air of music."

The porter withdrew slowly, without another word, but not without casting backward glances of doubt upon the new-comers.

"How do you dare?" asked Steven, fixing almost awestruck eyes upon Geiger-Hans, who, nursing his instrument upon one knee, was coolly winding up the strings.

"Dare, I?" He twanged the cord, shook his head, and fell to screwing again.

"Why should I not dare? What have I to fear? What have I to lose? We are sure of a welcome, I tell you—of a supper, and of a good joke."

"Your magnificent audacity!" said Steven, sitting gingerly down at the end of the bench, and looking at the other's lean figure as if it had been that of the Prince of Lies himself. "Positively, I myself could hardly believe you were not speaking the truth."

"And so I was," said the other, composedly. "Not one word but was solemn verity."

"Oh, but stay! How come I to be kinsman to the Burgravine?"

"You are Austrian," quoth the musician. "So is she, as I happen to know. Both the finest flower of the Empire's aristocracy. If you're not related somewhere ... I'll eat my fiddle."

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Steven, opening his eyes very wide. "I suppose it is on the same kind of plea that you have your acquaintance with the Burgrave. An intimate acquaintance?"

"Intimate. I have said so. The Burgrave of Wellenshausen is a type that is true to itself."

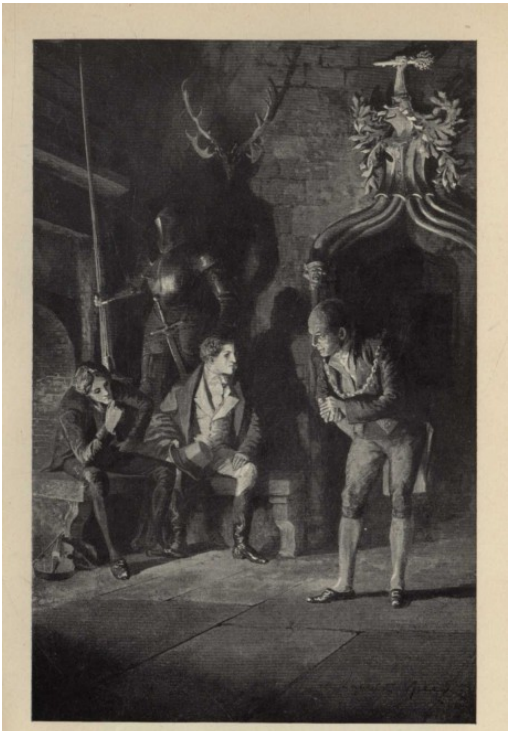
"And he has invited us to visit the Burg?" Steven's tones broke into mirth.

"Indubitably." The player raised his fiddle and drew a long note from it that was a musical mockery of the young man's high key. "The husband who locks up a light-hearted wife alone in a solitary tower invites in terms most positive every gentleman of heart and spirit in the country to come and console her. M. de Wellenshausen is at Halberstadt, on the King's business—I was playing at the Crown Hotel. He will be here to-morrow. And he said to me: 'Friend'—mark you, *friend* (the Burgrave had dined satisfactorily; the wine is excellent at the Crown), 'you must come and play that tune at my castle.' He's fond of music, you see. 'Twas a promise. And the only person who will lie in the whole matter to-day is the noble lady Burgravine. She is dying by inches of *ennui*, and she will—be quite certain of it!—she will assure the porter that our visit has indeed been announced to her. 'Tis to be regretted, but such is the way of women who eat their hearts away in lonely strong houses."

He caught his fiddle to his breast: liquid melody flowed out into the empty hall, and went echoing down long passages and up into vaulted roofs. Like rabbits from a warren, now a scullion popped a head out of some dark corner, now a rosy wench half opened a side door and peeped, smiling. There awoke all about the sleepy castle a sound of skirmishing and tittering; now a patter of bare feet; now the tramp of boots that no precautions could hush. At length the majestic form of the major-domo himself appeared before the vagrants, magnificent in his silver chain and silk stockings and buckle shoes. Geiger-Hans hushed his music and leaned over to Steven to whisper in his ear:

"See, he has been putting on his grand garb of ceremony to deliver his lady's little lie."

"The high-born, my mistress, had not expected you before to-morrow," said the butler, with a deep bow to Steven. He cast a fish-like eye of astonishment upon the fiddler, but, nevertheless, pursued: "Will your honour follow me to your apartment?" Again he stared at the musician, who nimbly rose and bowed.



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"The high-born, my mistress, had not expected you before to-morrow," said the butler, with a deep bow to Steven.

"My honour will also follow," he said blandly. "Our valise is on the donkey's back, at the door; see to it, my man."

* * * * *

If Geiger-Hans were surprised at his own success, it was only the humorous twitch of his eyebrows that betrayed the fact. He was of those, apparently, whose talent for seizing opportunities generally evoke the belief that they have created them.

"Comrades should share and share alike," said he presently, laying down Steven's brush, which he had been wielding dexterously on his own locks—"lend me a black ribbon for my queue—it is out of mode, but I am of the old stock. I have been shaved *à velours* to-day—'twas an inspiration! A cloud of powder would complete me, but you new-century bucks know not of these refinements. Nay, but here is a pot of the finest Parma, as I live! For the chin and cheek of *milord* after the razor, no doubt? Now shall you see how it became the countenance of a better-looking generation.—I think that black suit of yours so neatly folded in the corner of our valise is, perhaps, what would best grace my gravity. Yes. And a ruffle shirt.... Thank you. Ah! ... And those violet silk stockings."

Steven stood hypnotized.

"Your eyes will positively drop out," said the fiddler, "if you stare any more." He drew a snuff-box from his discarded coat, and tapped it with his finger. "A pinch is but a poor thing, if a man has not a frill to his wrist," he said. And he was apparently not ill-pleased to see how Steven marvelled at the grace with which he swung his borrowed laces, the air with which he flipped an invisible atom from his cuff. He took a step, as though his legs had never known but silk. Steven's suit, if a little large, hung on his figure with a notable fitness.

"As I live!" cried Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg, with a loud laugh of discovery, "a gentleman, after all!"

Geiger-Hans drew his black brows together with his swift frown.

"Your equal, you mean, doubtless?" said he, dryly. "You do me too great honour." Then his eyes softened again, as in his turn he surveyed his companion. "Come," said he, "I would give all my superior years for some of your youthful disabilities. I cherish no illusions as to which of us the fair Burgravine will deem the better worth her notice."

And, indeed, when the two were ushered into the long, dim, tapestry-hung saloon, the bright eyes of the lady of the castle merely swept Geiger-Hans, amazingly distinguished as he was in his borrowed plumes, to rest with complacency on the youth who followed him.

Steven held his head high, after the fashion of your shy, self-conscious fellow. But his head being one upon which Nature had set a noble stamp, this became it well. If there was pride in the arch of his eyebrow and the curl of his lip, there was, likewise, race to justify it. Betty, the Burgravine, could note as much

between two flickers of her long eyelashes; note, too, that (thank goodness!) he wore none of those new, odious Cossack trousers, but kept to the fashion which made it worth while for a man to have a good line to his limb; note, furthermore, that plum-colour frac, maize waistcoat, and dove-grey kerseymeres make excellent harmony with rose taffeta. The lady had been created for courts, and even now, perched like a humming bird in the eyrie of a mountain eagle, moved in a gay, trifling atmosphere of her own. And, as he returned her gaze, Count Steven, who had also been constructed for the high places of life, felt that he was in his element once more.

"The—the gentlemen!" announced Niklaus, with a nervous giggle. He knew Geiger-Hans—as who did not that belonged to the country-side? But familiarity had not so far bred contempt, and neither he nor his compeers would have ventured to question anything the mysterious being chose to do. Had the fiddler desired himself to be announced as the Archangel Michael, or Prince Lucifer, or the Emperor Napoleon, or the Wandering Jew, Niklaus would scarcely have been surprised.

The rose-red lady advanced a sweet little sandal and made a profound curtsey. Her classic top-knot of curls was richly dark, and so was the olive velvet of her cheek; but as she looked up slowly from her inclination, Steven was quite startled to find that her eyes opened blue as forget-me-nots.

"Gentlemen!" ejaculated she, translating Niklaus' clumsy Saxon German into tripping French—it being the tone of German Courts to speak French. The blue flowers of her eyes widened in surprise upon Geiger-Hans. She had not known there were two *gentlemen* when she looked forth from the window; only the goodly youth and his roadside guide. But this elderly person was a gentleman, no doubt about that, and a fine one, too.... Only, so old!

And now he took the lead, as became his years.

"Madame la Comtesse," responded he; and even Steven, in spite of his Anglo-Austrian ear, could note the exquisite purity of his Gallic accent, "permit two travellers to express their gratitude for the generous alacrity with which you have granted them hospitality. We had lost our way——"

"Lost your way!" interrupted the lady; and an irrepressible smile curved her lips upwards.

"Yes, madam," pursued the other, imperturbably; "and, with the night coming on, in this wild and mountainous district, Heaven knows what might not have happened to us!"

"I know not what your destination may be, sir," answered she, drawing back with a faint air of haughtiness, "but surely yours is a strange itinerary that took an isolated crag on the road."

"Madame," said he, "we gave ourselves infinite pains to attain this height."

The glance towards herself, the touch at his heart, the bow, made of these words a delicate compliment. The line of her mouth began once more to waver.

"To have gone down again, madam, would have been impossible. Our itinerary, as you say, is perhaps difficult to explain. If I were to tell you that we took a wrong turning, my friend here would correct me, for he is convinced, madam, it was the right turning, since it brought him to your feet."

Here Steven could do nothing but bow in his turn. This he did, however, with such youthful grace and so ardent a look, that his hostess melted outright into smiles.

"Sir—!" said she, coyly; and the young man felt he had been eloquent indeed.

"Count Steven Lee zu Waldorff-Kielmansegg," introduced Geiger-Hans, with a wave of his arm.

"Lee? ... Waldorff?" quoth she, surprised.

"Steven Lee in England, Waldorff-Kielmansegg in Austria," said the fiddler, blandly.

"*O du mein lieber Oesterreich!*" she exclaimed, singing; and the forget-me-not eyes became suffused with the tear of sensibility.

"Waldorff-Kielmansegg of Waldeck," enumerated the master of ceremonies; while Steven stood in dignity, conscious of his honours.

"Then we are cousins!" She clapped her soft palms; the rising emotion was forgotten in laughter. "Positively we are cousins. I am Schwartzenberg—Betty von Schwartzenberg—and my mother's second cousin, Rezy Lützow, married Tony Kielmansegg. You are welcome, my cousin."

She held out her hand. He kissed it ceremoniously; and she, bending forward, sketched a butterfly salute on his forehead. It was the custom in his father's country; but he had lived long enough in England for it to have grown unfamiliar. His heart contracted with a delicious spasm, and the blood sang in his ears. Before he knew what he was doing, he found himself holding the taper fingers close, found his lips upon them again.

Perhaps the lady was displeased; but, if so, she cloaked the fact with a very pretty blush, and, as they drew apart, there could be no doubt but that the young visitor's position was established. She now looked expectantly towards the elder of her guests.

He stood watching them with quizzical gaze, tapping his snuff-box, one leg becomingly advanced. She waited to hear a no less fine-sounding introduction. But as the waiting was prolonged to almost a hint of awkwardness:

"Will you not," said she, "Cousin Kielmansegg, return Monsieur's good offices?"

It was Count Steven's turn to blush.

"My friend," said the fiddler, after enjoying the poor youth's agony with a relentless eye for a second or two, "has been content to accept my companionship as entertaining and useful to himself without inquiring into my ancestry. But such indulgence, my gracious hostess, I cannot claim of you. Through all the noble blood that flows in your veins, there mingles, of course, still a drop of Mother Eve's. Permit me to make myself known to you as Jean, Seigneur de la Viole, Marquis de Grand-Chemin.... I lay but a couple of my poor titles at your feet."

She pondered awhile, nibbling her little finger, her delicate eyebrows wrought as if in effort of memory. Then she said with gravity:

"Your name, sir, has an ancient sound."

"Madam," he responded, "I would not boast, but there is none more ancient in our world."

Over again she pondered, looking down at the tip of her sandal. The blue eyes took stock afresh, and, thereupon, sunshine chased the gathering cloud from her face. With the air of one making up her mind to be amused without questioning:

"You are welcome, too," she said, "Monsieur My Guest."

"Ah, madam," responded he, "pity that this, the fairest of my titles, must needs be the most fleeting!"

Tying a blue riband into a hasty knot as she came, entered Sidonia, almost at a run. All this time she had been striving to turn her heavy fair tresses into the fashionable top-knot, as demonstrated by Countess Betty—with what result her aunt's first glance of pity told her but too clearly. She halted in her rapid advance, and stood, blushing like a school-girl, unable to lift her eyes.

"Child," said the Burgravine, "here is my cousin, Count Kielmansegg, who could not pass by his kinswoman in exile without personally inquiring after her well-being." When Sidonia ventured a stealthy look, it was to find—oh, bitter moment!—that she was unrecognized. "And this gentleman——" pursued her aunt, with a small, sarcastic smile.

The girl, bewildered, had begun her second curtsey, when she stopped herself with a cry of utter amazement—

"Thou, Geiger-Onkel!"

"Madam," intervened the fiddler, gravely, addressing the Burgravine, "that is yet another of my honours—to young people who love my music, I am the Geiger-Onkel."

"We are decidedly *en famille* to-night," said the Burgravine, with a trace of acidity. "But here, child," she proceeded in a meaning tone, "your friend had better be known as Monsieur de la Viole."

"Marquis de Grand-Chemin," insistently added the vagrant, with his courtly

bow.

"Marquis de Grand-Chemin," admitted the lady. Nevertheless, it was the arm of her cousin, the mere Count, that she took to conduct her to the dining apartment.

CHAPTER VIII
ROSES OF TRIANON

"As for the girl, she turned to her new being—
Loved, if you will: she never named it so:
Love comes unseen—we only see it go."
AUSTIN DOBSON.

The servants had retired: Master Geiger-Hans' promised supper-party was over. It had been to the full as succulent and as elegant as he had foretold. And now, holding the stem of a long cut-glass beaker between his second and third fingers, he was gazing abstractedly at the noble wine. Where were his thoughts, and why was he so dull all at once, with flower and silver before him, crystal and fine porcelain? With the ruby waiting in his cup, too—the ruby of that noble "Clos Vougeot" before which Bonaparte, the republican, on his way to Italy, had made his soldiers halt and present arms as to the prince of vintages! Geiger-Hans, who could sing over a hard crust by the dusty roadside and give thanks for the water of the mountain stream, had he had his violin in his hand now, its music would have been of tears.

His eye moved. It rested first on the fresh briar-rose face of the girl with a strange look of tenderness; then it fell upon the Burgravine. Her plump, olive shoulders half out of her gown, her exquisite little doll face thrust forward—the whole of her an altar to admiration—she was offering herself in eagerness, in ecstasy, to the fire that was beginning to kindle in the hitherto decorous countenance of the youth opposite to her. And as the musician noted this, he frowned and his lips curled into contempt. Then his gaze sought Steven. He saw the flush upon the boy's cheek and the light in his eye; and his frown grew deeper. This trivial flame was none of his kindling.

He turned in his chair and looked again keenly at the silent girl. There was

something austere in the mantle of pride and shyness in which she had wrapped herself.

"Little Mamzell Sidonia!" said he, softly. She flashed a glance at him and her eyes filled. "Shall I make you some music?" His face relaxed into tenderness again as he spoke.

She nodded. The corners of her mouth quivered; if she had said a word, she must have burst into sobs.

"She but put a pillow under his head," thought the fiddler, "and that was enough to make the flower of love blossom! Ah, youth! Poor heart!" Once more he regarded the other pair, who were now whispering.

"After the feast, the dance. What say you?" he cried.

"Oh, the dance, the dance!" exclaimed the Burgravine, leaping to her feet.—What a woman, what a puppet!

"Then I will play to you," went on Geiger-Hans. And grinning Niklaus was despatched for his violin.

"It shall be a minuet," said the player after a pause, on the echo of a sigh.

Then the Marquis de Grand-Chemin waved his bow with a flourish. The ruffles at his wrists flew, he took a step with a grace: it was as if a fragrance from dead Trianon roses were wafted in between the barbarous Gothic tapestries of the Burg.

"It is the dance of great ladies and fine gentlemen," he said, beginning a melody of bygone days, mingled with archness and subtle melancholy. And playing, he went on, his words winding themselves with a kind of lilt of their own into the garland of sounds: "You, sir, bow with your hand on your heart. You take her hand and you look into her eyes. 'Ah!' say you, eloquent though silent, 'to hold those delicate finger-tips, madam, through life ... to have the rapture of your sweet company ... then, indeed, would every step be music!' 'Oh, sir' (says she in the same language), 'you overpower me!' And with this she sinks from you into a curtsey that is all dignity, all grace. Again you bow—'of a verity you did not deserve her!' But what is this? Her hand is in yours again. Oh, this time you draw closer to her ... you hold her little hand aloft! The satin of her gown whispers to your damask—her shoulder for one instant touches yours—you lead her from right to left—with what pride, heavens! what respect! You turn her lovely form, by the merest hint of your adoring fingers, from that side to this, that all may see, and see again, the prize that has fallen to your lot...."

"We do not dance the minuet in our days," interrupted Steven, with bashful resentment.

John of the Viol's delicate measures, that had rung half humorous, half pathetic, wholly sweet, as memories of past delights must ever be, ceased abruptly. He gave the young man a dark look as he held his bow aloft.

"No," said he, "you are right. The minuet has gone to the guillotine. France has brought new dances into fashion: *Ça ira, Ça ira ... Dansons la carmagnole*!" His face grew terrible as he struck the notes of the blood-stained gutter-song into his strings. "New dances for France, that she may dance to her death!..."

"Fie, the ugly tune!" said Countess Betty. No shadow of the musician's tragic passion was reflected upon her face. "Monsieur le Marquis, play us a valse!" She caught joyfully at her own suggestion as a child its ball. "A valse, a valse! Beau Cousin of Kielmansegg, they tell me 'tis the rage. A pin for your old minuets!"

"A valse be it!" said Geiger-Hans. Anger was upon him, and he made his violin chant it, setting it and the brutal irony of the "*Ça ira*" to the rhythm of a fantastic valse. "Twirl, vapid heart and empty head! Hold her, prance round with her, feel your goat's legs growing, you who might have lifted your head with the gods and known the matchless rapture of the heights! Is it for this that you are young?"

Faster and faster went the music, fevered, with mad, shrill skirl; and faster the whirling. Beau Cousin began to pant. He held Belle Cousine so close to him that she, too, scarce could breathe. Loose flew her hair—one little sleeve almost broke across the heaving shoulder. Sidonia could look no longer; she turned to the window and leaned her hot cheek against the pane, staring at the stars with burning eyes. Something clutched at her heart and throat with a fierce grip.

Without warning, Geiger-Hans brought his bow across his strings with a tearing sound, and, as if a sharp sword had fallen between them, the dancers fell apart, astonished and not a little confused.

Steven staggered and caught at the chair behind him. The Burgrave's lady put a hand to her dishevelled tresses, then to the laces at her bosom and grew scarlet: brow and cheek, throat and shoulder.

"You no longer dance the minuet?" said Geiger-Hans, with a little laugh, picking at his now placid strings; and Steven thought that the man had the laugh of a devil and that it was echoed by his instrument. "Oh, you have a thousand reasons, sir, and so has madame, for the valse is a fuller measure. Gracious lady, you are out of breath. May I sit beside you awhile? And you, sir, will you not expound the first principles of this—this graceful and elegant pastime to mademoiselle yonder, whose youth has yet to learn the new fashion? Is it not right, Burgravine, that these young things, after all, should foregather, while you and I look on—you, the staid, married woman; I, the old man?"

She answered him not, save by a look of wondering offence.

"Ah, madam," he went on, as he sat down beside her, "and you are angry with your lord and master because he shuts you up in this strong-house? But, good heavens, it is the proof of his loving appreciation of your value."

"Oh, ay!" she answered in high contempt, "it is a sign of strong affection, doubtless."

"Madam, he lays his treasure where thieves cannot attain it. At least, poor man, so he fondly trusts!"

"And therefore the unhappy treasure is to be consumed by moth and rust," retorted the lady.

"Madam," said the fiddler, in a low voice, "I imagine that the owner of the treasure had reason to fear a more indelible stain——"

"How dare you!" she flashed upon him.

But he was picking his violin with a pensive air. Then he suddenly looked up at her and smiled.

"Ah! most gracious one, if I were the happy possessor of a bird of such brilliant plumage as yourself, I would——" He paused.

"You would what? Pray proceed." She was waiting for her triumph.

"I would open wide all the doors and bid it fly."

And then she called to him again, "How dare you!" And so insulted was she that there came a sob into her throat.

"You see," said he, drawing an accompaniment of whispering notes to his words, "that, after all, it is monsieur your husband's point of view that you think the more complimentary."

"He should trust me," she whimpered.

"Madam, who knows?" he responded; "stranger things have come to pass. Some day, perhaps, the bird will not crave for flight; it may cling to the nest."

His fingers moved delicately; the bow swung with the gentle pliancy of some green bough of spring—it was a measure of engaging rhythm and playfulness; yet soft, soft as, under the eaves, the swallow's note at dawn.

Fascinated, she cried, under her breath: "What is it?"

He answered her, "A cradle song——" and stopped.

His own face had altered indescribably. His restless eye had grown fixed and wistful. Little Madame de Wellenshausen hung her head, and—wonderful indeed—a tear gathered and fell!

* * * * *

Whilst Geiger-Hans thus engaged his hostess, Steven Lee, with slow steps, had gone across the room to the girlish figure by the window. He had grown to believe that the wanderer had some uncanny power by which he enforced his will, after the fashion of that Mesmer of whom one had heard so much. Sidonia turned upon him, with a sudden jerk of her chin, a flash of her eye, as he halted beside her. Upon which he exclaimed in amazement:

"Why, great heavens, you are the girl of the forest house!"

"You have not, I think, sir," she answered him, "eyes that see quick or far; it is, no doubt, your town breeding."

The colour was slowly fading from her cheeks. She held herself very stiff and proud. But he was still all eager over his discovery.

"Geiger-Hans told me how you brought me your pillow," said he, "when I lay hurt in the forest."

"I would have done the same to a sick dog," said she.

"You cried over me when you thought I was dead, he said," exclaimed Steven, stung by her contempt.

"Had I known you better, sir——"

Her eyes were bright and hard, her lip was a curve of scorn and her chin a tilted defiance. But all at once he saw that, under the close-clinging fabric of her short-waisted gown, her heart was beating like a madly frightened bird in the fowler's net. The knot of blue ribands upon her bosom danced with its fluttering. And there came upon him a desire, at once tender and cruel, to feel that beating heart beneath his hand. He gave a short laugh.

"Shall I teach you the valse?" he said, leaning forward. "It is quite easy—just my arm about you, and the music does the rest."

She shrank back with a look that would have blasted him.

"Do not dare to touch me!" Though her heart palpitated into her very voice, she held her head high as the hind in the forest and went on: "I might have danced that minuet, as Geiger-Onkel put it into music. But I don't like your manner of dancing, sir—nor your English manners at all. It would be best if people stayed in their own country." And then, while he stood, as if her childish hand had struck him, she passed from him, paused for a moment before her aunt and the fiddler, who were still sitting together in silence: "I am going to sleep," she said, and went proudly out of the room.

Geiger-Hans had shaken off his musing fit. He laughed out loud.

"What, comrade, won't mademoiselle learn the valse from you, after so pretty a display?"

Madame gazed down at her feet, as they peeped side by side from the hem of her garment, looking, the little humbugs, the pink of innocent propriety. She was subdued, even frightened, and her small heart was unwontedly stirred within her.

"Our evening is finished," said the Marquis de Grand-Chemin, rising with his great air. "Madam, this gentleman and I must march out with the dawn. Permit us now to offer you our very respectful gratitude, and to retire."

She held out her hand, and he took the tips of her fingers, bowing low. She curtseyed. They might have been in his minuet now, but it was with the music left out.

"Good-bye, my cousin," she said timidly. And "Good-bye" said he. They stood stiffly before each other, like two children found at fault. She was longing to tell him that it must not be "good-bye" between her and him. But the fiddler's eye was upon them.

* * * * *

Steven felt the world very flat, even on a mountain strong-house, as he sat down in the state bedroom and began with a yawn to unwind the folds of his stock. Next door Geiger-Hans had locked himself in. He had not spoken to his companion since they had entered their apartment. Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg felt that he was in disgrace with the roadside fiddler, and the sensation was curiously uncomfortable. Suddenly the door was opened and his companion walked in. He was clad once more in his own shabby suit, and across his arms carried the borrowed garments.

One by one he laid them down neatly in the valise, rolling up the violet silk stockings at the last.

"Continue," said he, "my friend, to develop the growth of those goat legs of yours; it will save you in hosiery.—*Pulchrum ornatum, turpes mores*.... Need I quote further?"

"Upon my soul!" cried the young man, "I don't understand what you mean!" But his cheek crimsoned.

"You disgraced me to-night," said Geiger-Hans. "What, sir! I have the kindness to bring you up here that you may snatch a delicate, courtlike comedy from a lost century, and you turn it into a gross latter-day romp. I bring you from an alehouse into a castle, but you must needs drag up your Teniers with you and spoil my Watteau! I play you a minuet, but what appeals to you is to clutch and to gambade and——"

"You made the music, man," interrupted Steven, sulky as a schoolboy. "And it was she who asked for a valse."

"*Mon Dieu!*" went on the fiddler, passionately; "it may be that we were no better as to morals, in my youth, than you are nowadays, but at least we took our pleasure like gentlemen. If we plucked a rose, we did it with a grace—between two fingers; we did not tear it with the fist. We did not seize a lady round the body and prance with her like hind and milkmaid; what favours we took we bent the knee to receive. Oh, sir, how little fragrance remains in the flower you mangle thus in your grasp! Three things there are, young man, that he who understands

life must touch with fingers of gossamer—a subtle pleasantry, a lady's discretion, the illusions of a maiden's heart. You have laid brute hands on all three to-night.—Fie! you have spoiled my evening."

The contrast between the man in his humble clothes and the arrogant culture of his speech suddenly struck Steven to such a degree that he forgot to be angry in his eagerness to catch further self-betrayal from the fantastic enigma. Become aware of his eye and smile, the fiddler broke off abruptly and, for the first time in their acquaintance, looked disconcerted. Then he gave a good-humoured laugh, and his brow cleared.

"Blind, blind!" he resumed. "Why, was she not worthy of one look, the child in her virginal grace? When I came across you again to-day, under the shadow of the Burg, my heart leaped like a little hare. 'Here is one now,' I told myself, 'who is learning worthily the value of his youth. He shall yet learn of a better than I: for youth must to youth—the creatures of spring to each other.' I resolved, God willing, that the fair romance that fortune had brought across your path in the forest should not, after all, close at the first page. It was but cloud-building; it was but a spring fancy in an autumn dream—fancy of an old fool! Why, you did not even recognize her! Yet she held your head on her knees, when you were hurt. You were a knight to her, all gallant—and now!"

"She seems an ill-mannered child," said Steven, sullenly.

"She is as lovely as the woods at dawn—young, reluctant, mysterious, chill. When I approach her, it is with my hat in my hand. If I were young like you, I should kneel to her. The set of her head, the line of her little throat——" His voice grew suddenly husky. "Her little throat——" he repeated.

And Steven, he knew not why, had an impression of a sadness so piercing that he dropped his eyes and dared not look at Geiger-Hans again.

After a while, with a change of voice: "I will wake you at sunrise," said the musician. "I have promised the children to play for them before school. Besides, I must see you safely to the foot of the hill, ere we part, Count Comrade, having brought you up so high, else heaven knows what fall might not be in store for you!"

And on this he left the room once more.

* * * * *

The crescent moon, very delicate and soul-satisfying, hung in a wreath of watery mist, high in the sky; far down, the plain was wrapt away in white vapour. The rugged walls of the Burg, even its rocky foundations, seemed poised between heaven and earth amid these floating wreaths of immateriality. It was a strange sight. The fiddler sat on the sill of the deep window embrasure, his

knees drawn towards his chin, for it was but a narrow space, and his eyes wandered out through the open casement over the unsubstantial world. He looked forth. Downward the gleaming rock emerged into stern reality, out of a dream of vapour. He looked up: the shredded mists were scudding over a faint sky, carrying the moon along, it seemed, with incredible swiftness.

The wanderer sighed. Sorrow went with him in all his ways, though he held so mocking a front to life. It was luxury now and then in the hour of solitude to fall into that deep embrace, and give his very soul to those bitter lips.

* * * * *

Very unwilling was Steven Lee to rise after a poor night. And very ill-humoured was he as they set out at last, with their donkey, breakfastless, together. There was no joy or mystery in the morn; it granted them but white mists that wet like rain and clung close as they descended.

The fiddler was silent, absorbed in his own thought, and paid small heed to his companion's moodiness.

As they crossed the bridge, a travelling-chaise, escorted by three dragoons, came through the haze towards them, passed them at full thunder, and drew up with a clatter some hundred yards beyond. Geiger-Hans smiled sardonically.

"There goes the lord of Wellenshausen to surprise his fond little wife! He is a trifle earlier on the road than I expected. Did I not do well to hurry your toilet? Who knows, you might have been hurried in still more disagreeable fashion.... Well, the episode is over; and though you have much disappointed me, young sir——"

"But what will she tell him about our visit?" interrupted Steven, with some anxiety.

Geiger-Hans remained silent for a few paces.

"That," he answered at last, "is a matter for illimitable fancy."

CHAPTER IX
HOME-COMING

"And then he thought, 'In spite of all my care,
For all my pains, poor man, for all my pains,

She is not faithful to me...."
(*The Marriage of Geraint*).

"The visitors are but just gone," said Martin, the doorward.

He stood, his hand still on the fallen bolt, with expressionless gaze fixed upon the Burgrave, not without secret dismay and misgivings. In truth he had but half believed the fiddler's announcement, had scarce expected his master at all that day—certainly not so early. But, now, one would know whether that mad fellow Geiger-Hans had spoken truth about the invitation to Wellenshausen. If he had not, why, honest Martin might well suffer for his credulity. For Martin knew his lord. It were idle to try and hide from him the blatant fact that there had been visitors at the Burg: idle indeed in a house full of silly servants; idle, above all, with a prying fellow like Kurtz, the Jäger, who had his nose into every pot and his ear at every door.

That he, the door-keeper, had admitted a beggar-man to his lord's castle was, however, an exaggeration of the offence which old Martin thought might safely be withheld. Ambrosius, the butler, Niklaus, the valet, and the rest were equally incriminated by having attended upon him, having served him at their master's very table. They would be glad enough to hold their peace on the subject for their own sakes. At the worst, they could all plead ignorance of the visitors' identity. For the rest, had not the Gracious Lady herself given her orders? If the thunderbolt of wrath was to fall on the castle of Wellenshausen, it would fall first and heaviest in the upper chambers.

So Martin had settled his treatment of the situation with a certain dogged philosophy; and his first greeting was the blurting forth of the truth.

"Your Graciousness has just missed the visitors."

The Burgrave, rolling past, still puffing from the arduousness of the mount—for though a vigorous man, he was of heavy build—turned with a grunt of astonishment as the words fell upon his ear. He flung back his military cloak—even a chancellor was military at the Court of Jerome—dashed his lace travelling cap from his head and took two steps upon old Martin. His large unshorn chin shone with myriad grey bristles, which had caught the mist in tiny points of moisture. The grizzled, bushy eyebrows, that nearly met across the large fleshy nose (jealous eyebrows), were similarly beaded. Now they were drawn together in a portentous frown.

A fine-looking man enough in an elderly, hulking way, but scarcely, even in his best moments, an amiable-looking man. Certainly not at his best now, after a night of hard travelling. And as for amiability, that thunder cloud upon his brow was enough to wilt the very conception of it from the thought of man.

Yet it was no unamiable passion that had spurred him along the interminable night-road and up the impossible crags in the wet morn. He was but a six months' husband to his Betty, and he loved her very dearly—after his own Teutonic and rather mediæval fashion.

"Visitors!" repeated the Burgrave. His voice rang out, echoing and reverberating.

Martin's little eyes blinked: that rogue of a Geiger-Hans had lied! So, then, had the noble lady Burgravine herself.

"Two gentlemen, yes. The Gracious Lady bade me admit them. She said that it was by your Excellency's orders;" here the door-keeper risked a sly glance at his master and had, perhaps, an inward chuckle at the sight of his discomposure.

"Scamp, had you not my orders?" roared the Burgrave.

"The Gracious Lady bade me admit them," reasseverated Martin; "the young gentleman being the Gracious Lady's cousin——"

"The young gentleman! The——"

The echoes called out the words again and died into silence. The Burgrave reeled, then steadied himself. Martin saw the empurpled countenance turn to an unwholesome grey.

"The young gentleman," repeated the husband to himself, in a sort of whisper. Then he wheeled round and, without another word, went, ponderous and slow, up the stone steps, his shoulders bent like those of an old man.

* * * * *

Betty was seated before her toilet table, in a very ill humour: the while her woman twisted glossy black ringlets to the tune of familiar lamentations, enlivened by spirits of a petulance unwontedly shrewish.

Betty had dragged her pretty person from the billows of quilt and featherbed at an astonishingly early hour, in the hope of carelessly intercepting a farewell from her charming young guest. Mademoiselle Eliza, justly irritated at being aroused from those dreams which, she vowed, were now the only tolerable portion of her existence in this dungeon, had purposely withheld from her mistress, until the psychological moment when she could watch her countenance in the mirror, the news of the departure of the guest. And then she had delivered it with all the gusto of the self-respecting servant who has unpleasant information to impart.

"Madame has a very sensitive head this morning; it is doubtless the fatigue of last night. Madame is so unaccustomed now to the least excitement. It is hardly worth while to put madame to the pains of much of a coiffure this morning, since

there is no one to see her—but the crows. If, indeed, the young gentleman could have remained: strange how anxious he was to leave! Up and away before the dawn! And slinking out of the castle, one might say. Ho, have I hurt madame again? Did Madame la Comtesse say that he was truly her cousin? A singular story, not even a valet with him—nothing but that old beggar tramp, who dined with madame, also, dressed up in the gentleman's clothes——"

"Hold your tongue!" cried the exasperated lady. She whisked round in her seat, blindly menacing with a brush caught up at haphazard.

At this moment the gate bell clanged; the stone hollows of the castle growled to a loud knocking; and then came the groaning of the great bar.

"Merciful heavens, more visitors!" exclaimed the mistress of Wellenshausen, a lovely geranium flushed into her cheek. Last night's guests back again, perchance. Beau Cousin was too gallant a gentleman, after all, to leave her hospitality in this abrupt fashion.... Perhaps he was wishing to see her again, as much as she was wishing to see him. The little hand with the brush dropped to her side. "Quick, Eliza, who is it?"

Even as she spoke the rich cheek faded; her bright eyes grew round in horror. To one man only in the world could belong the raucous tones that granite wall and roof now gave back in pulsating vibration, rolling up even to the turret room.

"The Burgrave!" she gasped.

Eliza's black eyes glinted joyfully: the Burgrave! Not only fresh discomfiture for the mistress; but, for the maid, unexpected comfort: Kurtz the Jäger was quite a smart young man.

"Heavens, the Burgrave!" cried Betty again; and she began to tremble. Her husband, upon the very stroke of her escapade! What to do, now, what to say?—What indeed!

"Eliza," she cried breathlessly—she snatched a gold brooch from her wrapper as she spoke, and thrust it into the girl's hand—"you knew I was expecting my cousin's visit ... by news brought by the last courier from Vienna ... you heard me mention the fact ... you heard me regret my husband's absence from Wellenshausen."

There was no time to lose. The Burgrave's step, weighty and ominous as fate itself, was already on the stairs.

"*Bien, Madame la Comtesse,*" returned Eliza, calmly, even as the latch clicked under her master's hand.

Betty von Wellenshausen was a woman of too clever instincts to receive, in this dilemma, her elderly lord and master with exuberant expression of delight. She

was not of those who fall into the vulgar error of protesting too much. She settled herself in her chair again and became deeply absorbed in the exact position of a curl. He stood glowering on the threshold. He had to call out in his great voice, before she would condescend to notice him at all. And then it was but a glance over her shoulder.

"*Tiens*, it is you? Eliza, decidedly this is not successful."

Eliza, deeply enjoying the situation, full of professional admiration for her mistress's handling of the same, was also all solicitude over the rebellious lock.

"Ten thousand devils, madam!" at last exploded the Burgrave. "I would point out to you that I am returned from a journey."

"So I see," said the lady, with another fugitive glance. "And so I hear, too, my friend! Heavens, you make noise enough!"

It was such a wonderfully pretty face, of which the husband was given this glimpse; his reception was so cool, so unexpected, that the Burgrave's first murderous rage began to give way to a perplexity not unmixed in some strange way with softer feelings. He closed the door behind him, and then stood, hesitating.

"It is a pity," said the Burgravine, boldly, "that you do not consider it worth your while, comte, to keep me informed of your movements. Had I but known that we were to have the rapture of your company to-day, I would have kept my cousin Kielmansegg to make your acquaintance."

The Burgrave eyed her between rage and amazement.

"Your cousin!" he echoed huskily. Then his fury, on a sudden gust of jealousy, got the upper hand. "Pray, madam," he thundered, "when did you communicate to me the interesting fact of your relative's proposed visit? And when did I authorize you to receive him?"

It was the lady's turn to be astonished; for a moment her quick wits failed to follow his drift.

"When?" she queried, raising a delicate eyebrow. "This is sheer delirium! And if you must rave, my friend, need you shout? I begin to think that my never-sufficiently-to-be-regretted predecessor must have suffered from deafness in addition to the other trials of her existence."

The pupils of the Burgrave's pale eyes contracted to pins' points. He fixed his disobedient spouse with a scarcely human glare.

"Martin is not wandering in his mind, I take it, when he tells me that you bade him admit your friends in my name! By my wish, madam—by my wish!"

The bellow with which, in spite of his Betty's protest, he had begun this indictment, died into a sort of strangled whisper. He struck his palm with his hairy fist. The Burgravine was unpleasantly enlightened.

"Oh, sir," she exclaimed with biting scorn, and shrugged her shoulders, "how well you are served; I make you my compliments!" Underneath her im-

pertinent airs there was fluttering terror. But, like a bird, she would peck to the last. "And did Martin indeed tell you that I bade him admit my kinsman and his companion in your name?" she pursued, drawing a long breath. Then superbly, "It is true, M. de Wellenshausen. Do you mean me to understand that you would have wished me to refuse the hospitality of your house?"

The wave of wrath was again ebbing from the Burgrave's huge frame. He stared blankly at the little creature. Her words had a singular plausibility. She saw her advantage and flew to it.

"My cousin, Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg, is travelling through this country," said she. "My dear mother announced his arrival in her last letter."

"The courier came on Wednesday," interpolated Eliza, pinning the brooch in a slightly less conspicuous position amid the folds of her kerchief.

"She is most anxious to have personal news of my health ... knowing the delicacy of my chest, and how much I am likely to suffer in these harsh airs where it is your pleasure to immure me."

The Burgravine wheeled her chair round to face her lord.

"It is perhaps dull of me," she went on more boldly still, "not to have understood that I am not the mistress of these barren walls, but rather their prisoner. When I heard that my cousin was below, I had no hesitation in ordering him to be admitted. Yes, sir, I even said that it would be your wish.—Ach, Eliza, what a stupid mistress you have! You heard me actually lament, I believe, your master's absence on the occasion!"

"*Madame la Comtesse*, indeed, made the remark to me," quoth Eliza, "that it was of the last annoyance that Monsieur le Comte should be absent that evening. It was so trying for Madame la Comtesse to have to receive alone!"

"And indeed, my poor girl," said the lady, picking up the thread herself, "I could regret that we should thus innocently have infringed the rules of the castle of—I should say the prison of Wellenshausen—for it was to very poor results. Yes, we should have allowed M. de Wellenshausen's doorkeeper—turnkey, I mean—to send the gentlemen down the hill again. My people would have wondered. But, *mon Dieu*, will they wonder less when my kinsman tells them of these dismal walls, these rude surroundings, this savage solitude? Poor young man! in spite of his affection for me he could not bring himself to face another day of it.—Eliza, my shoe!"

"Indeed, madame," commented the maid, pursuing the theme from where she knelt to fit each little foot, "the gentlemen would not even tarry for breakfast, so hurried were they to be gone!"

The Burgrave listened, was half convinced, then a fresh spasm of suspicious misgiving came over him.

"Yet, doubtless," he sneered, "not without a satisfying farewell from the

hostess! You are strangely early this morning, madame."

The Burgravine raised her blue eyes from the contemplation of her foot.

"You mistake," she said innocently; "our adieux took place last night, shortly after supper. You see, I am not even dressed. And, as to early rising, *mon Dieu*, my friend, the nights are of such lengths here, that there are times when I think it cannot soon enough be day."

"And *ma foi*," put in the maid pertly, "then it is the days that are so long, up here in the clouds, that it cannot soon enough be night."

The two women laughed. He stood between them, a miserable clumsy man; conscious of their subtler wits and quicker tongues, a prey to dark doubts and slowly shaping his own resolve.

Betty now jumped to her feet and shook her loose silks and laces about her as a bird shakes its plumage.

"Eliza, inform the Baroness Sidonia of the Herr Graf's return," she bade in an off-hand tone.

The Burgrave thought to catch a meaning glance between mistress and maid. No doubt Sidonia would lie with the other—all women were jades alike. Well! he knew what he had to do; meanwhile Betty was distractingly alluring with all those fal-lals of ribbons and lace, and it was three weeks since he had kissed her. The door had scarcely closed on Mademoiselle Eliza before the Burgrave caught his wife in his arms.

"Ah, *mon Dieu*," cried she, pettishly, "and pray, sir, when have you shaved last?"

CHAPTER X

THE BURGRAVE'S WELCOME

"I tempted his blood and his flesh,
Hid in roses my mesh,
Choicest cates and the flagon's best spilth...."
ROBERT BROWNING.

"So you have had visitors, Sidonia, my dove? Eh?" said the Burgrave.

His tone was good-humoured, but the glance he fixed upon the girl was

cold. He had very pale grey eyes that could stare by the minute together without blinking, a power somewhat disconcerting (he flattered himself) to those who thought to keep secrets from him. Sidonia had just entered the room and was hastening to greet her uncle, for whom she had a certain placid affection. But instinctively she drew back, affronted, upon meeting that gaze. The words of welcome died on her lips.

"Yes, we've had visitors," she answered defiantly, tilting back her head.—Did Uncle Ludo think to frighten her?

"That was delightful," said the Burgrave, his unwinking stare upon her.

"It was delightful," said Betty. She stood behind her husband's chair, ministering to him after the right Germanic fashion he loved; and small scornful remarks on the number of rummers she was called upon to fill with the yellow wine, on the size of the slices of smoked ham he dealt himself, she did not spare him. Nevertheless she watched his appetite with satisfaction. Surely so large a meal and much jealousy could scarce find room in the same frame. "It was delightful, for me at least," said Betty, glibly. "I, who had not seen my cousin, my favourite cousin, for so long."

Her blue eyes rolled warningly at Sidonia, over the top of the Burgrave's stubble head. The girl gave her aunt a quick look, then walked up to the table.

"Good morning, uncle. I hope you are well," she said, demurely now, and laid a light kiss on his temple.

The Burgrave burst into a roar of laughter.

"Come, come, one kisses one's uncle better than that, I hope!"

He caught her by the lobe of her pretty ear, stretched out the other hand and drew his spouse forward by the waist.

"So, here I am, once more, with both my little doves. Aha, what a happy man!—This fine young cousin now, your aunt's old play-fellow ... you'd heard of him before, eh, Sidonia?"

"Yes, I had," said the child, sturdily. "I knew he was in the country. And you need not pinch my ear like that, Uncle Ludo, I don't like it."

"But it was such a little visit," said the Burgrave. "That was the pity of it. And to think of my having missed the pleasure of so agreeable an acquaintance! Your favourite cousin it was, that's understood, my Betty. And his companion, the old gentleman, who might he be?"

"His companion? Oh, he seemed to be a kind of tutor," returned Betty, with a charming sense of satisfaction to be able to say something at last approaching to the truth.

"Well, my darlings," said the Burgrave, still more jovially—he had slipped his great arm round Sidonia's waist now and held them both embraced—"it is early in the morning yet, and I am sure you will be charmed to hear that there is

every chance of my letter finding the distinguished travellers still in the village." Each little figure in the Burgrave's grasp started. "Quite a surprise for you, eh? Come, this gaoler (aha, Betty!) is not such a bear after all! Not so inhospitable as to allow his wife's dear relations to leave the district without discharging his duties of politeness. Yes, I have sent Kurtz, hot foot, hot foot, with an invitation to your cousin, my love, to return, with his companion, to the hospitality of Wellenshausen.... What, not a word of joy from either of you? My little doves, one would think you were displeased. Have I not interpreted your wishes, sweetest Betty? I would fain do so, for you who are so clever in interpreting mine."

"Let me go," cried the little lady, of a sudden goaded to fury. "You are squeezing me to death. Please to remember that, if I am married to a bear, it does not follow that I enjoy his hug!"

The Burgrave released his victims and looked searchingly from one to the other. Both were pale.

"What a festive time we are going to have in the old Burg!" cried he then, with an ugly laugh, and fell to upon the ham and ryebread with fresh gusto.

* * * * *

It was a great folded sheet, and bore, on a huge seal, a spreading coat-of-arms. It was addressed as follows: "To the High-born Graf zu Waldorff-Kielmansegg, at the Silver Stork Inn, Wellenshausen," and contained a brief but courteous message:

"HONOURED SIR,

"I have just returned to my house and hear, with desolation, that I have missed the amiable visit which you have vouchsafed to it. Hoping that you and your tutor may not yet have left the neighbourhood, I send this in haste. Will you not both retrace your steps—if you think our poor hospitality still worth acceptance—and give me the exceeding gratification of calling myself your host for at least a week?

"**CHARLES LUDOVIC**, "Burgrave of Wellenshausen."

The young traveller, who, warmed into better spirits by his early walk, had been looking back on his stolen visit to the castle on the peak, and his evening with the ladies sheltered behind its forbidding walls, as an adventure of some spice

(though, in its integrity, harmless enough) was seized with disappointment. So much for latter-day romance; so much for the Bluebeard of Wellenshausen; for the husband so ferociously jealous, report said, that he must shut up his Fatima in a tower as tight as St. Barbara's! Why, so far from striking off Fatima's head, he sends in haste to recall the audacious visitor, and craves to be allowed to expend upon him the treasures of an amiable disposition.

"Ah, fiddler, my friend," thought Count Steven, sagely, "you and your music have discoursed much wild nonsense anent the surprises of life, anent the golden rose of youth; ... but the world is a workaday place, drab and dull of hue; and the dreams with which your words have filled my thoughts are but the children of my own fantasy and your own fiddle-bow."

He looked across the inn-yard, through a screen of vine leaves, to where the fiddler was seated on a bench, playing away with a will, eyes beaming upon a ring of dancing children. The heaviness of the morning was clearing; shafts of sunlight pierced the mists. Steven hesitated. The messenger from the castle, a smart Jäger in a green-and-mulberry uniform, stood on one side with the decorous indifference of his condition, his lips pursed for a voiceless whistle to the tune that made gay the poor inn-yard. A little further away, the young nobleman's travelling-chaise was even now being packed, under the supervision of his lordship's body-servant.... The Burgrave's invitation was banality itself, almost trivial; yet was not the programme for the day's journey more everyday still?

A phrase in the letter, that had escaped notice on his first surprised perusal, now brought an angry flush to his cheek.

"His tutor——" And he, full twenty-three and practically his own master these many years! Was it possible that he could have made no stronger impression upon the Burgravine than that of a kind of schoolboy? As for Sidonia, since she knew the musician so well, she must also have known that he was but a chance acquaintance! Yes, it was evident that he had placed himself in an awkward position by this consorting with a person of inferior degree.

This decided the matter. He owed it to his own dignity, to that of his family. Was not the pretty mistress of yon castle, by her own showing, a kinswoman? He would go back and redress the ridiculous misapprehension.

* * * * *

A bell began to jangle, ugly and persistent. The fiddler drew a long last note, whereat the children raised a shout of protest.

"Schooltime!" cried the musician. He got up and nodded across to Steven. "Has my Lord of the Burg invited you back upon his height?—Don't go."

The man's intuition was positively diabolic.

"How did you know?" gasped Steven.

"Know? Do I not know the candid countenance of my lord Burgrave's Jäger? Did I not see him accost you? Do you not hold a letter in your hand? O, I thank my Maker that, crazy as my brains are, they can still add one and two and make it three. And, had I not the simple figures before me, the Burgrave's course would still lie plain."

He came near to the young man, and dropping his voice:

"The poor Burgrave," he went on, "must be slightly befogged in the mist of his lady's diaphanous explanations. He must sorely want to see for himself what there is between you."

"Between us!" Steven stared and then blushed. "Good heavens, what can he think?" he asked.

"Certainly not the truth," answered the fiddler; "it would be too innocent."

He twanged a string, and it seemed to mock. Too innocent...! His smile, too, was mocking, Steven thought. Innocence savoured unpleasantly of that state of tutelage which no mature man of three and twenty could endure to admit. And yet, last night, had he not been rated for something approaching to an immoral tendency? Confound the fellow, there was no pleasing him! Now and again, like the peasant folk, Steven could almost think the vagrant was possessed.

"Don't go," repeated the fiddler, gravely. "Leave the Burgrave and his lady in their fog."

"You advise me not to go!" cried the young man, pettishly. This sober counsel, certes, was quite the last thing he had expected from lips that hitherto had suggested the out-of-the-way step, the fantastic resolve; urged them passionately, in the name of Youth and Opportunity.

"Write a pretty note," continued the other, unmoved. "Send it back by our friend yonder, and make your servants happy by taking the road for Cassel.—Cassel is full of Betties and you can prance there in good company."

He looked familiarly over Steven's shoulder as he spoke, and gave a mirthful ejaculation—

"*Sarpejeu*! I am invited also, I see."

Kurtz, the dapper Jäger, who had swaggered up for a critical inspection of the traveller's horses, here flung a quick glance at the speaker. Furtive as it was, the musician caught it, and smiled back:

"What," said he, raising his voice and addressing the count, "your tutor, my young friend? Heavens forbid! The counsellor of your youthship, for a brief occasion, I grant it; but for the rest I trust I have more grateful work in the world."

"I do not press you to accompany me. I can quite well go alone," said Steven. "You need not return with me—unless you wish it."

The other made an ironical bow, and the young man dropped his eyelid

under the gaze that read his thought as in a written page. Certainly, keen as he had been but the day before for the fiddler's company, it was the last thing he now desired.

"Oh," retorted Geiger-Hans, "never fear, our ways now diverge. Yours is too lofty for me, comrade. You are for the peak, I am for leveller roads. Beware how you fall." He was shaken with laughter—laughter that somehow left Steven more uncomfortable than angry.

Then the wanderer cocked his instrument and set up a wild skirling air, to the rhythm of which he turned and marched out of the courtyard. Ill at ease, Steven watched him go, go.

* * * * *

Count Kielmansegg drove in state to the foot of the crag; and, while his box and valise were loaded upon the mule that was again to climb the rocky path to the feudal nest of granite, he paused to look down at the waters that rushed past the road, so swift and dark, so cruelly cold, from unexplored caverns on the flanks of the mount. As he stood the travelling fiddler overtook him and swung by on the highway.

"We shall meet soon again, I trust, friend," Steven cried after him as he himself turned to ascend the path.

"Who knows?" said the fiddler over his shoulder, even as on their first parting by the edge of the forest, but this time in a grave voice.

The young man glanced up at his destination, black and grim against a pale sky, and a chill came upon him like a sudden shadow.

CHAPTER XI
TANGLED TALES

"*One lie needs seven to wait upon it.*"
(*Wisdom of Nations*).

Steven was scarcely observant by nature: your important, self-centred youth is rarely like to prove so. Yet the Burgrave's welcome at Wellenshausen, cordial to

effusion as it was, left upon him a further impression of discomfort.

Jerome's Chancellor had very fine manners, when he chose, and was altogether a finer personality than, somehow, Steven had expected. His joviality was certainly hard to reconcile with that character of tyrant that seemed to be universally ascribed to him. Moreover, Steven had no more reasonable ground of complaint as to the quality of the hospitality proffered to him than as to that of the wines served during the heavy midday meal, for which they soon assembled. His irritable self-esteem, ruffled by the thought of having passed for a young gentleman under control, ought to have been thoroughly soothed by the attentions, the deference, the honours that the Burgrave lavished upon him. And yet——

When he was once more left alone in the great apartments that he had shared with the fiddler on the previous evening, he found himself heartily wishing again for his singular comrade—nay, wishing that he had followed the latter's advice and were still hobnobbing with him, along the wide valley roads or in some vine-hung inn arbour, in safety and independence.

He went discontentedly to the window and flung it wide; it was sunk in some eight feet of solid masonry, and, high as the castle stood, the honest airs of heaven seemed to have no free access into the chamber.

How was it that the vault-like oppression of the place had not struck him yesterday? He stood, pondering, for a while; then gathered himself into the window recess, even as Geiger-Hans had done during last night's watches.

The evening shades were rising apace. Night birds were beginning to circle round the lonely towers; distant lights to twinkle in the village below. How far off lay those comfortable glimmers yonder; how sheer the depth that separated him from them! An owl hooted, and the chill of the stone pressing about him seemed to creep into his marrow. He heard a great clang somewhere beneath and the grinding of iron-bolts. "Pah—the place is like a prison-house!" he cried to himself angrily and scrambled back into the gloomy room.

Then his valet entered with candles. The fellow's face bore a smirk; he, at least, found the Burg (with the fascination of Mademoiselle Eliza) an incomparably more agreeable spot than the Silver Stork.

After him came a rosy-cheeked, bare-footed girl, with a huge faggot in her arms—and presently the great gaping hearth was filled with a roaring blaze. And Steven, in a wadded dressing gown, stretching his limbs to the warmth, began to feel able to review the events of the day with a more settled spirit.

... No doubt there had been several instances at dinner, when he had felt himself in an outrageously false position—allowing (he thought severely) to that mist of lies with which the Burgravine had undoubtedly filled the atmosphere. Triumphantly as her beauty had stood the morning light, exquisitely as her elegance, her fashion, her youth, might have struck any impartial observer by con-

trast with the gloom of the mediæval castle, Steven, on the second meeting, had found himself cold to her, ashamed in the recesses of his heart of his previous surrender. He wished women would not think it necessary to deceive.... Why, in the name of common sense, could not the creature have told the simple truth? His visit had been a mere freak—an intrinsically harmless one. She must needs give it an aspect of guilt by an unnecessarily complicated farrago of explanation. It had taken him all his time indeed (and no wonder he could not look back upon that endless repast without a shudder) to parry the Burgrave's point-blank questions concerning people of whose very existence he had no knowledge, and to respond airily to the Burgravine's feverish hints, finding himself, meanwhile, further and further involved in myths and inventions. And, throughout, the Burgrave—what a deuced uncomfortable way of staring was his!—had an eye and a laugh that matched each other very ill.... And the child, Sidonia, with now that look of scorn, now that air of grave rebuke, under which his already irate feelings in regard to her almost merged into active dislike....

Cross-purposes had in truth begun on the very threshold.

"Welcome, Herr Graf," had cried the Burgrave—"welcome both as my wife's kinsman and as a distinguished traveller in my own country!" He had been clasped by two genial hands. So far so good!

"But—your companion, your worthy tutor, where is he?" (His tutor! The man meant Geiger-Hans. This was awkward.)

Steven had no answer ready, nothing but a foolish obvious statement:

"He has not come."

How lame it sounded! The Burgrave had instantly dropped the subject.

Now that he came to think of it, Steven realized that it was here his discomfort took birth. Why had his host dropped the subject? It was a procedure that harmonized neither with the relentless scrutiny of his eyes, nor the ultra-joviality of his manner. And all through the dinner it had been simply variations on the same *motif*. A straight question, an unsatisfactory answer, the complication of the Burgravine's embroidery and over-clever suggestion—and the subject dropped. Thereupon an access of hilarity on the part of his entertainer ... such loud laughter, such unmirthful eyes!

As Steven, staring unseeingly into the fire, repassed the little scenes in his mind, his cheeks flushed.

"Your tutor, Count—by the way, what is his name?"

"Well, he's hardly my tutor, you see."

Here cries from the Burgravine: "A French gentleman!—so charming a person! Nay, Cousin Kielmansegg, I flatter myself I have a good memory, especially for anything French. M. de la Viole, wasn't it?"

"Yes," from Steven, grunting uneasily, "something of that sort."

"Quite an elderly man," hastens to add the Burgravine, with a quick look at her husband.

"Try this Burgundy, Clos-Vougeot, the Emperor's favourite," says the Burgrave, and laughs.

He drinks a good deal of Burgundy himself, does the Chancellor; and gets a fiery countenance: but not a sparkle into the little grey eyes.

"How long may it be since you left Austria, my dear young friend?"

"Oh—years," blurts Steven.

Of course he ought to have looked to the Burgravine for his cue. But, the devil fly away with it, he does not take kindly to these deceits! The Burgrave's gaze shifts suddenly to his wife. The glass trembles in her little hand. She is obliged to lay it down; but her voice does not falter, she is quite ready: "Years? Is it possible? Nay, cousin, have we both grown so old since last we met? But no doubt, in that cold, dull England, the time hung mighty heavy with you. It seems years to you, but—then we corresponded—at least, when I say we, I mean my mother, who loves you as a son."

And, "Oh yes—yes!" says Steven, in miserable acquiescence.

... What will the Burgrave ask next? The merest insistence on his side, and the whole despicable scaffolding of taradiddles must fall to the ground. And then——? Then—no man in his senses would believe the truth. But the Burgrave presses nothing. The stone roof echoes to his huge "Ha-ha's." 'Tis as if the thought of the love of his mother-in-law for his guest was quite a remarkable jest!...

The sweat of shame and anger broke on Steven's forehead as he sat before the fire, immersed in this review of the day's doings.

Two days went by, the heaviest Steven had ever passed in his life. He would have given a year of his life to be able to invent some fitting excuse to take a decent leave. But his tongue, forced to so much petty falseness, could frame here no tale that carried conviction. He had gone so far as to send his servant down into the village, with orders to bring back an imaginary courier. But, at the first hint of intended flight, the Burgrave broke into protestations; his voice was so loud and his gimlet eye so boring, that the plea of urgency withered away from the guest's speech, and he found himself wretchedly concurring in his host's hearty announcement that Wellenshausen had him and Wellenshausen would hold him at least for the allotted week.

He had the further misery of noting that here joy flashed at him from the blue depths of the Burgravine's eyes, and anger from the brown limpidity of Sidonia's. Indeed, he, the least fatuous of youths, had begun to find something discon-

certing in the persistence with which the blue eyes were given to seeking him: now in veiled languor, now with a meaning that seemed to claim complicity. Glib in speech and airily indifferent to him in the Burgrave's presence, in the moments when they were alone together—and these were rare, for Steven avoided them; though it would almost seem as if the Burgrave himself fostered the occasions—she was prodigal of sighs, of interrupted sentences capable of strange endings, of little fluttering movements towards him, all of which added supremely to his discomposure; all of which, also after the fashion of man, he felt almost as much ashamed to admit as significant as to repel.

On the morning of the third day, Steven, invited to inspect the view from the battlements in an exceptionally clear light, found himself alone with Burgravine Betty on the topmost turret of the Burg. The Burgrave had sent them forward; his laugh was echoing up to them from the inner recesses of the winding stairs.

"O heavens!" said the lady, suddenly.

Steven turned. The cry was tragic; and it answered acutely to his own sensations. The Burgravine's eyes were dry, but there was real terror on her pretty face.

"Why did you come?" she whispered. "In the name of mercy! was it not evident that it was a trap?"

"A trap!" he stammered.

"Yes, yes! Oh, do you not feel it? He is watching us like a cat, a cat going to spring; and I am the wretched mouse waiting—waiting. O, I can stand it no longer! I shall go mad. If only you had not come! What did I tell him? There was nothing to tell, say you; we had done no harm. That is just it! I told him a lie, of course, and he found out it was a lie—that is of course, too. A man who has spies all about his place! And now we are doing nothing but lie, you and I. He knows we are lying, and he is waiting to pounce on us in his own time. O, sir, you might have known! A man who shuts up his wife for jealousy is not seized with such effusive hospitality towards a handsome young stranger without reasons of his own."

The warm olive crept back to her cheek as she spoke. Her eyes beamed. She seemed to sway towards him.

"Then, madam," he cried, quickly stepping back—if there were indeed danger for him between the Burgrave and the Burgravine, he would rather choose to battle with the man—"you are right, I ought not to be here. I will go now. To-day ... this hour!"

"Go?" she echoed in scorn. "Aye, go if you can," she proceeded with a change of tone. "He has got you well in his meshes; you are clogged, sir, and bound. And if you think he will let you go before he has carried out his purpose

with us, you little know the Burgrave."

Carried out his purpose with us!—The very vagueness of the suggestion added to its unpleasantness. Steven jerked his head indignantly.

"And what may that be, pray?" he asked.

She glanced at him a second, uplifting lip and eyebrow. To a lady who had graduated in the Court of Vienna, this big young man, with his English stolid simplicity, was a trifle irritating.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she said then, turning aside with a shrug of her shoulder, "how embarrassing you are! Do you know your poets? Well, then, he would like to find us playing at Paolo and Francesca, if you please, that he might play the Malatesta!"

"Great heavens!" cried the horrified youth. He watched the lady hang her head and droop a modest eyelid—it was Scylla and Charybdis! Beyond any doubt, he must walk out of these mad-house precincts at the very earliest opportunity.

They were perched high up in the blue; and, down below, the country lay spread like a green cloth on which a child has set its toys. Yonder white ribbon wandering so far below—there ran his road. Would he were on it! He turned to her, took her soft hand, bent and kissed it.

"Madam," said he, "it is best it should be 'good-bye'—for both of us, it is best."

He spoke very truly, poor young man, but into the touch of his lips and the pathos of his speech her vanity read another meaning.

"Cousin!" she cried suddenly, and clutched at his hands with both of hers. "O, take me with you! Take me back to my own people! If I stay here, he will kill me, or I shall kill myself!"

And, as his troubled face and involuntarily repelling fingers were far from giving her the response they craved, she rushed across and bent over the crumbling parapet.

"Refuse your help," she cried desperately, "and I throw myself down!"

(Had little Sidonia but been at hand, to tell him how well accustomed she was to such threats!)

Steven was quite pale as he caught her back against his shoulders.

"Mercy!" he shivered, thinking of those giddy deeps. She clung to him, her scented head against his shoulders.

"Surely, surely, it is not much I ask!" she murmured faintly. "See how I trust you, kinsman! Only your protection, your escort back to our own people. It is not much to ask!"

It meant his whole life, and he knew it. But what can a young man do with a woman's arms about him and a woman's whisper pleading in his ears?

"Ha-ha-ha!" came the Burgrave's laugh from below. Countess Betty slid

out of "Beau Cousin's" arms. She lifted a warning finger. "I will arrange," she whispered, nodding. "Now we must be seen no more alone together."

Sidonia's voice also rang up towards them. "I will write," whispered Betty again, finger on lip.

O heavens! how could she look arch and smile at such a moment?

"My friend, I have been showing our cousin how far your estate extends," said the lady, gaily, tripping across to take the Burgrave's arm with more ease than she had yet displayed with him since his return.

"I trust our cousin has profited by your instruction, and that he realizes the boundaries of my property," said the Burgrave of Wellenshausen, with his genial smile and his icy eye.

Steven's heavy conscience read a hateful significance in the remark. As he turned, his glance fell upon the Baroness Sidonia's pure child face and he felt miserable and ashamed to the core.

* * * * *

The Burgrave's jaunty Jäger stood and saluted in military fashion. The Burgrave wheeled round in his chair and bent his brows. It was dark in the great stone room but for the single shaded lamp on the writing-table, which flung a pallid circle of light upon his intent countenance. So might some ancestor of his have looked, four hundred years before, as he planned with his henchmen the treachery that should rid him of an enemy.

"I have to report, my lord," said the fellow, "that the Count Kielmansegg's travelling carriage is ordered to be in readiness at the foot of the hill to-night."

"So!" The exclamation was almost triumph.

Kurtz pulled a slip of paper from the breast of his tunic and held it out.

"Will your lordship open it with care?" he remarked imperturbably, as the Burgrave's eye shot flames and he stretched out an eager hand. "The gracious lady has not yet seen it. And I have promised Eliza that it should not be crushed."

The Burgrave held the note to the light. It was in French, and very terse:

"All is arranged. I will wait for you at the entrance of the east tower at nine o'clock."

The Burgrave stared at the words for an appreciable time. An apoplectic wave of blood rushed to his forehead, and the veins thereon swelled like cords. Then he folded the paper again with minute precaution and handed it back.

"Return it to the wench, and bid her deliver it," he said briefly. "Well, what now?"

"I beg pardon, my lord, but this has cost me my watch-chain to-day. And I took upon myself to promise her further two gold pieces."

"Fool!" said the Burgrave, harshly. "Could you not have done as much by love-making and never cost me a kreutzer? Young men like you are scarce in these parts."

The Jäger shrugged his shoulders. "She took the kisses as well," he said cynically. "What would his lordship have? Women are like that!"

The other flung the coins across the table with an oath. Those were better days, of old, when a man could have his bidding done in his own castle without any such bargainings. But, as the servant wheeled and swung towards the door, his master recalled him.

"You have left my orders in the village? If that fiddling beggar dares present himself near my doors again, I shall have him flogged till the skin hangs in strips, and then ... and then set the dogs upon him. The miserable rapscallion; the impudent cur, to dare to play his tricks as high as my very table, to dare to break bread with my wife!"

The Burgrave struck the table so that the rummer of Burgundy at his elbow splashed red upon his hand; the Jäger glanced at the empty bottle and then at his lord's inflamed countenance, and gave his soldierly response:

"*Zu Befehl.*" Then he added, the insolence of the servant who feels superior to his employer in coolness and clear-headedness piercing through his well-drilled air of subordination: "May it please your Excellency, the folk about here believe the fiddler to be some great person in disguise."

The Burgrave's eyes were bloodshot this evening; the Jäger was minded of the glare of an old boar at bay.

"It is quite likely," he proceeded jauntily, "that the gentleman was similarly deceived."

"The gentleman—the gentleman? What gentleman, you rascal?"

"The gracious young gentleman, the cousin of her Excellency."

The Burgrave gave a savage growl:

"Out of my sight!"

With some additional briskness of gait, Kurtz drew the solid oak door between himself and the Chancellor.

Alone, Betty's husband yielded himself to a convulsion of rage. Again he beat the table with his hands, anon tore at his bristling hair; suffocating, he wrenched the stock from his throat; broken words, curses, threats, ejaculations of self-pity escaped him. When at length he recovered his senses in some fashion, he was shaking as if from an ague. He caught up the last glassful of wine and drained it at a draught. Then he subsided heavily into his chair, and drawing unmeaning signs with his fingers through the spilt wine upon the polished oak, began slowly to repeat, half aloud, the words of the letter Kurtz had brought him.

"The entrance of the east tower, at nine o'clock."

Suddenly a shout of laughter escaped him.

"The entrance of the east tower. You have chosen well, my turtle doves!"

He let his head drop between his hands and sat in sodden brooding.

CHAPTER XII

THE BURGRAVE'S FAREWELL

"—*What means this, my lord?*
—Marry, this is miching mallecho; it means mischief."
(*Hamlet*).

Countess Betty had the megrims and declined to appear at supper. For a sufferer, however, she had a bright eye, and she moved about her room with the alacrity of a busy bird. She was alone, some belated notion of prudence having bade her dismiss her handmaiden during the final preparation. Her eyes were taking in wistfully the dimensions of the small travelling-bag (which was all that, in conscience, she could allow herself, since Cousin Kielmansegg would have to carry it himself down the precipitous roads) and the numberless objects which, at the last moment, seemed to her indispensable, when there came a tap at her window. She started—and only the sense of unacknowledged guilt weighing on her soul kept her from screaming aloud for help—when she perceived, pressed against the uncurtained pane, a man's face. The next instant, however, she had recognized the wandering fiddler. She hurried towards him.

"A message?" she cried eagerly, as she opened the casement.

The man swung himself in and sat on the deep window-seat. His face was wet with rain. He gazed upon her for a second, quizzically, and when he spoke it was not in reply.

"Here I come," said he, "by the ivy, at the risk of my neck, I, whom your worthy lord and master threatened to have flogged and thrown to the dogs, if he caught me up here again! What a foolish plight should I be in, had I counted upon your tender heart sparing a tremor for my perils! It is enough to make a man desire to walk in by the door for the rest of his life!"

"But, in heaven's name," she exclaimed, having but a matter-of-fact spirit, in spite of its dainty envelope, "you did climb up all the way to tell me something.

Was it not a message?"

He bowed.

"From him?"

He laid his hand on his heart. "From myself," he answered.

She glanced at him and then at her bolted door in renewed alarm. He read her thought.

"God forbid!" quoth he, smiling with an air that put him, in his poor raiment, at an extraordinary distance above her. "I should not so presume, madam.—Are you aware," he pursued in another tone, "that your husband's confidential Jäger was in intimate conversation with Count Kielmansegg's postilion in the village to-day?"

"Mercy!" she cried, reading the portent.

"After which, my dear madam, he climbed the hill in a company that lightened the way for him, having, in fact, his arm round the trim waist of your own handmaiden."

Countess Betty sank on a couch, white to her lips.

"Your trusted handmaiden," repeated the fiddler, emphatically.

"Alas! if I had hesitated," said the lady, piously turning up her eyes to the vaulted ceiling, "this would decide it; I dare not risk another night in this castle."

"Taking risk for risk," said the musician, carelessly, "if I were timid, I should prefer the waiting hazard."

"You mean?" she panted, round-eyed, in quick apprehension.

"I mean," said he, "that it is raining exceedingly hard, and that between this and the foot of the crag you will get wet, madam; so wet as to extinguish for ever the most ardent flame."

The Burgravine rose with dignity. "I will have you know, sir, that I am merely accepting Count Kielmansegg's protection back to my own family, because I know I can trust to his honour."

"Quite so," said Geiger-Hans, in a soothing voice. "And it is, of course, infinitely preferable to set forth by night in secret, with a handsome young man, than to summon any more aged or nearer relative to your help! A father, maybe—or a brother? But it is raining, as I say, madam, very hard. So much for the start. And I am afraid when you arrive in Austria your noble family may consider your journey ill-managed."

Her bosom heaved.

"It is very unjust," she moaned, "that you men can do everything, whereas we poor women——" She paused on the brink of tears.

"Ah!" he retorted, "you women are the crystal cups that hold the honour of the house! That is why we must set you in a shrine, madam. To-night it is still sanctuary in your presence, and I can still kneel before you. To-morrow——?"

The colour rushed into her face. She tried to speak with haughtiness, but her voice faltered.

"To-morrow—what then?"

"It is inconceivable how much wiser it would be for you to remain under a husband's roof on such a night!"

There came a knock at the door. With squirrel nimbleness the fiddler twisted round and vanished. The Burgravine took a rapid survey of the room, whisked the bag into a cupboard, the jewel-cases on the top of it, and went to the window to close it.

"One moment, one moment!" she called, as the knocking was discreetly repeated, and paused with her hand on the casement. Certainly it was most uncomfortable weather! Then she opened the door. Sidonia entered.

"Little aunt, is your head better?"

"Yes, child, yes. You have supped? Is it so late?" Before the girl could answer, the bell of the castle clock began to boom nine strokes. "Nine o'clock!" shrieked the Burgravine. "What's to be done?" She struck her forehead with a distraught air. "I dare not trust that false Eliza," she murmured in her mind. Then her eye met Sidonia's candid gaze, and she caught her hand. "Listen, child; you shall do something for me. Count Kielmansegg is going away to-night."

The girl's pupils widened, her face grew paler, but she did not speak.

"'Twas I bade him leave. Your uncle's causeless jealousy ..."

The girl nodded. The Burgrave, in truth, had been no pleasant companion that night. He had drunk heavily, and alternated between glowering spells of silence and loud and almost offensive pleasantries aimed at his guest, both of which had, not unnaturally, considerably embarrassed Count Kielmansegg.

"'Twas my duty!" (Oh, how virtuous felt the Burgravine of Wellenshausen!) "I had promised him (poor youth, he is my cousin!) that I would bid him 'Good-bye.' But now"—(positively Countess Betty thought her niece must perceive the halo growing round her head)—"now it has struck me that if your uncle heard of it, he might misconstrue—— My dear, you must go and tell Count Steven from me——"

"I?" cried Sidonia, and started.

"You must," insisted the lady, harshly. "He is waiting in the east tower. Tell him this: 'My aunt has sent me to say "Good-bye" for her; it is better so.... It is better so.' Do not forget to say that. What are you waiting for, girl? Go! Perhaps you are afraid of the rain!" cried the Burgravine, scornfully, and seized the travelling-cloak that was lying ready on the bed. "Here, put this on; wrap the hood over your head. Now run, there is not a moment to be lost."

There was, perhaps, more urgency, more fear, in her voice and manner than she had been aware of, for Sidonia, after a quick look at her, gathered the folds of

the cloak about her and fled upon her errand. The Burgravine drew a long sigh of relief, then rang her hand-bell sharply.

"Eliza," said she to the responsive damsel, and, on the spot, froze her with a glance for the impertinent air of confederacy with which she had entered, "light up a fire and serve supper to me. My head is better. Trim the candles and give me '*La Nouvelle Héloise*? How you stare, wench! Have you fallen in love, perhaps, that you do your work so ill to-day?"

Steven's reflections, as he waited in the best-sheltered corner of the deserted tower, listening to the beat and gurgle of the rain, were of an unsatisfactory description. The folly of weakness is the worst of follies, the realization of it the most galling. He was about—no use in trying to blink the fact—he was about to ruin his own life; to take upon himself an intolerable burden; to commit, technically at least, a crime against hospitality; to put a stain upon his ancient name; and all without receiving in return the slightest gratification or being able to proffer, even to himself, the exoneration of any approach to passion. The mere thought of the long, intimate drive was a bore; the prospect of a possible life-long companionship with the Burgravine intolerable.

Geiger-Hans, mysterious wretch that he was, had much to answer for. And yet, had Steven followed his advice (he had, in honesty, to admit this) things would not be at this pass.

* * * * *

She came in upon him with a rapid step and a rustle of wet garments, stopped at the mouth of the passage, and said in a loud whisper:

"Are you there, *Herr Graf*?"

As he went forward, she clutched his wrist with a cold hand.

"Hush," she cried, "I think I heard steps behind me!"

Both listened, not daring to breathe. Oh, what a situation for a youth whose pride it had been to hold his head high in the world!

Nothing was heard, however, save the wild, dismal murmur of the rain over the land, and the nearer drip and patter.

"No, there is nothing," he said, and reluctantly passed a limp arm round her shoulders. To his surprise, they were jerked from his touch with resentment. The next moment, however, by a mutual movement, they caught at each other; for there came an unaccountable grinding about their ears, and almost immediately the solid ground gave way under their feet.

"Gracious Powers! is the tower falling?" cried he.

Even as he clasped the figure beside him, with the instinctive, protecting action of man for woman, he was aware that the slender thing in his arms could not be the Burgravine. But at the same instant they were sliding; and before he could do aught but throw himself backwards to avoid crushing her, they were shot with giddy swiftness down a steep incline. With a shock, his feet struck level ground; he lay dazed and breathless, her weight across his breast. Stars danced before his eyes. Vaguely, as from a great distance, he heard overhead the echo of a laugh; then a thud, and once more the grinding sound, as of heavy, rusty bars. It was the laugh that brought him to his senses; too often, lately, had that laugh rung in his ears!

She raised herself in his arms.

"Are you hurt?" he cried as he lay.

"No," she answered quickly. "Don't get up!" He knew by the sudden change in her voice that she had flung the muffling hood from her head. "Don't get up! don't stir! I must find out where we are."

He recognized now the young, clear tones. It was Sidonia, but he was past surprise. One thing alone stood clear out of his confusion: whatever it might be that had brought this about, he was glad, to the heart of him he was glad, it was not Countess Betty.

He felt the girl struggle to her feet, heard her grope with her hands above his head. There came a moment of great stillness: he knew she was listening. Unconsciously he hearkened too, and then there grew upon them, out of the solid darkness, the cry of waters, rising up with a sort of cavernous echo as from a great depth. And, with a flash, his mind leaped back to that fearsome race of brown river that swirled so strangely from the foot of the Burg-crag, just above the village bridge. He felt his hair bristle. But when she spoke again, the sound of her voice, with its extraordinary accent of decision, roused him like a stimulant.

"We are safe if we but keep where we are," she said. "You may sit up if you like, but do not attempt to stand." And then she added: "You do not know the place; I do."

She sat down beside him, and in the dark he felt her close presence once more with gladness.

"What is this place, then?" he asked, unconsciously whispering.

She answered him with a simplicity which almost made him laugh:

"It is the old *oubliette*."

Vague cruel memories of mediæval romance awoke in his brain. *Oubliette*! The word itself was suggestive, and not agreeably so.

"An *oubliette* is——?" he asked.

"The secret trap by which the castellan of old quietly got rid of enemies or of inconvenient prisoners. You see," she proceeded, with her astounding composure,

"through this tower, in former days, was the sally-port—there used to be no other way; and were any one whose existence interfered with the views of the Lord of Wellenshausen, passing out or in, it was easy to set the machinery in motion, with the result——" She broke off.

"Of landing him in our enviable situation," he finished pettishly.

"Not at all," retorted she. "It is the mercy of heaven for us that time and storm have been at work in these forgotten regions and provided us with so opportune a ledge——"

"What would have happened else?" he asked in a tone that strove to emulate her coolness.

"Sit quietly and listen."

He felt her reach for a stone, felt the tension of her vigorous young body as she flung it. He heard the missile strike the rock sharply, rebound and then rebound again. Then, after a silence, rose a faint sound, the ghost of a splash, the gulp of greedy, far-off waters, infinitely sinister. He shuddered.

"No one knows how deep it is," said she, "nor what lies hidden there. I can tell you, when I first discovered this pit, it terrified me. Old Martin had told me of its legends, but I had laughed at him. One day, some months ago, I scrambled in from the outside, for the old tower is falling in ruin, and explored the place. But I had no notion the old trap-stone in the sally-port still worked. Now I remember," she cried with sudden sharpness, "seeing Uncle Ludo wandering about the place this evening——" She stopped suddenly, struck by a new thought.

"But," exclaimed the young man, "in heaven's name, what have I done, to...?" And then his uneasy conscience whipped him silent.

"It is a horrible trick," resumed the girl, now with a passionate ring in her voice, "you, his guest——"

An indignant sob caught her in the throat. "You his guest!" she repeated. "Oh, whatever he thought of you, he should have remembered that! I can never forgive him."

The guest who had meditated, however unwillingly, the betrayal of his host, blushed painfully under the cloak of blackness. He heard her swallow her tears and knew that she clenched her hands. After a while she went on more quietly:

"How wise it was of Aunt Betty to tell you to go away! And, oh, how glad I am that she sent me instead of coming herself to bid you 'Good-bye.'"

Steven opened his mouth, and then closed it again dumbly.

"You would both have been killed," she went on, sinking her voice. "Uncle Ludovic must be mad—mad with his ridiculous jealousy ... and he's been drinking overmuch. Ah, dear Lord! If I had not been with you——"

She gave a shudder. He, on his side, had no words. He was silent in shame

before the exquisite innocence; silent in admiration before the self-forgetting courage of this slip of a creature, who thought nothing of her own danger. "Here, indeed, is good blood—here is the spirit of race!" he thought, touched in his most sensitive chord.

Presently, however, the humour of the grim situation struck him, and he laughed. There was Thistledown Betty, incapable even of acting up to her own unfaithfulness, snug in her bower, doubtless; and there was the outraged husband, gloating over his mediæval vengeance: Steven wished he could be present at their next conjugal meeting! Sidonia, childlike, echoed his laugh softly beside him in the dark. It struck him serious on the instant. The morrow seemed a terribly long way off.

"And now," said he, "what are we to do?"

"Hey, good sir!" said she, "nothing but wait. We shall not die this time, Herr von Kielmansegg; for my poor uncle"—she laughed in scorn and triumph—"he does not know, I warrant, that there is a way out of this old death-trap, since there is a way in. A way other than by the hidden lake and the barque of ancient Charon. But, till the daylight comes, sir——"

"Daylight!" he exclaimed, and knew not whether he were glad or sorry at the whole night's prospect.

"Till daylight comes, we must take patience here. For one false step would send our bodies to join the bones of the forgotten enemies of Wellenshausen."

"So, then——"

"Then, I should say, the best thing we can do is ... to go to sleep."

Again he was mute, pierced to the innermost fibre of his manliness. It was as if her child-heart had been suddenly revealed to him—its trustfulness, its simplicity, its courage.

"If you move a little to the right, carefully," she said, after a pause, "you will find it softer, I think. The earth has grown up there, and there are, I remember, ferns. You will really not be too uncomfortable."

The girl was positively doing the honours of the family *oubliette*! There came a tender smile to his lips, and almost a mist of tenderness to his eyes.

"But you," said he, "good fairy, guardian angel, do you never think of yourself?—Will you lean against me?" he went on, timidly.

He gathered her to him. What a slight, warm thing she was! She trembled as he passed his arms round her, and he instantly desisted. "Would you rather not?"

"I don't know," she whispered. He thought there was a quaver as of tears catching her breath.

All the chivalry in him leaped to her service. He drew back. With some difficulty he unwound his heavy cloak from himself. He was stiff and bruised,

and the uncertainty of his balance in the blackness gave him an eerie sensation as of precipices yawning for him on every side.

"What are you doing?" she cried severely.

"Let me put this over you," he pleaded. "And then you can roll up your own mantle and make a pillow of it—against me, thus."

"But you—but you——"

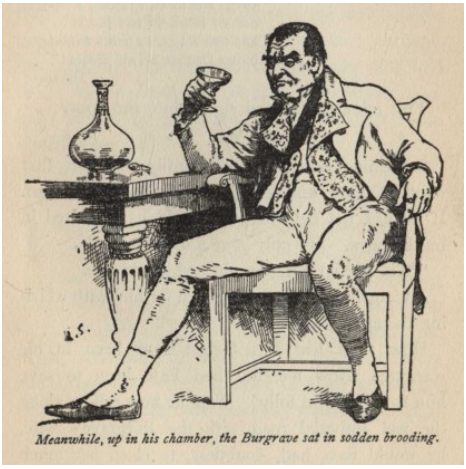
She struggled against his covering hands so impetuously that he caught her with a grip of alarm. And the sound of the rock crumbling away and leaping into the gulf gave its significant warning.

"You must keep quiet," said he, for the first time asserting the leadership. "And you must let me hold you and cover you. It is my duty to serve you, Mademoiselle Sidonia, my right to protect you. Sleep if you can. You will be safe, for I shall watch."

She remained motionless a minute and then submitted without a word. He placed his arm about her; her head drooped to his shoulder; there fell silence. In time he felt her rigidity relax, heard her quick breath grow calm and regular.

"You are afraid no more," he said gently.

"I don't think I was afraid," she answered him. Her voice had grown lazy; and, subtly, by the tone of it, he knew that she smiled. He felt ineffably proud of her confidence, ineffably protective towards her.



Meanwhile, up in his chamber, the Burgrave sat in sodden brooding.

CHAPTER XIII
THE OUBLIETTE

"Furcht bich nicht, du liebes Kindchen,
Bor der bösen Geister Macht!
Tag und Nacht, du liebes Kindchen,
Halten Englein bei dir Wacht!"
HEINE.

The minutes dropped slowly into the hour.

* * * * *

Something raised a blood-curdling screech that went sobbing and echoing through the cavern. If he had not held her, he would have started in frank alarm. She only gave a drowsy laugh.

"'Tis Barbarossa, the old owl," said she.

And again fell the silence, filled for him with whirling thoughts.

How right had this Geiger-Hans been in his warning! How merciful had Fate been to save him from his own folly! Were he now rolling along the wet Imperial road with the Burgrave's wife, he would have had, doubtless, to clasp her much as he clasped Sidonia. Precarious as it was, his present situation was infinitely preferable. He felt like a father, holding his pretty child, all warm with tenderness; not like a dishonest, cold lover with the woman he cannot love.

Sidonia's light breathing grew fainter and more rhythmic. She was asleep. He had longed, but hardly dared to hope, that she could sleep. In his heart he went down on his knees to her and thanked her, stirred by the eternal parent instinct, perhaps, but also by another emotion, tenderer still and more vital—a reverent bending of his whole manhood before the purity and trustfulness that lay in his embrace.

* * * * *

The night progressed with lengthening hours. He had begun to make out some kind of bearings for himself in the dark; to find, by the cold airs that occasionally blew in upon him from one direction, by the guidance of the sounds that grew in the night's stillness—the gusty increases, the placid subsidence of the rain, the

rustle of leaves and twigs—in which quarter of their prison lay that opening to the outer world by which they should escape.

Sometimes his mind wandered far away. Now and again he almost lost himself in a vague dream; but ever he came back with a shock to the present peril and his responsibility.

And the child still slept!

He began to grow weary and cold. His arm became stiff, then numb. The burden that had seemed so light upon it grew almost intolerable. Sometimes drowsiness pressed upon him, he thought himself in a nightmare, from which he must wake to find himself huddled in a corner of his travelling chaise. But he would have died sooner than disturb the sleeper.

Then, at the moment when the tension of enforced immobility brought such a feeling of exasperation and oppression that he almost felt as if his wits were leaving him, he turned his head instinctively in the direction of the air current, and relief came. The rain was over. The clouds had cleared away and a patch of sapphire sky looked in upon him, framed by jagged rocks: it held two or three faint stars. He could see a branch outlined dimly against the translucence, and leaves trembling in outer freedom.

Nothing more than this, and yet it was balm. The torture that gripped him subsided. He gazed and forgot the cramping of his limbs. The first stars passed slowly and vanished; others swam into his vision and formed new shapes in the peep of sky. Some were brighter, some more dim; some twinkled, one burned with a steady glow. They varied in colour, too. He had had no idea that, even through such a miserable hole, the heavens had a pageant to offer of such absorbing interest. And the passing of this pageant gave him a comforting sense of the flow of night towards morn.

Once Sidonia woke with a start and a cry.

"I am here," he quickly said.

She reared herself from his arm. It was numbed to uselessness; he caught her with the other fiercely. That pit, gaping so close by in the night, had come, during the long hours, to be to him as an unknown monster, watching, waiting for its prey. She, but half awake, gropingly passed her soft hands over his face and breast. "I dreamed you had fallen," she murmured. And then, so secure in his hold, stretched herself like a weary child, and slid a little further from him so that her head rested on his knee.

His eyes had grown more accustomed to the darkness; or, perhaps, there was already a raising of the deepest veils of night, for he could almost distinguish her form as she lay. He bent over her. She was speaking dreamily: "When you were hurt in the forest, this was how your head rested on my lap." In another moment she was asleep again. His arms were free—the sense of constraint was

gone. And now the time went by almost as quickly as before it had lagged. He saw with surprise that the stars were extinguished, that his patch of sky had grown pearl-grey. Rapid stirrings in the leafage without spoke of an awakening world. A bird piped. The walls of their prison began to take shape.... He saw the white glimmer of her hand in the folds of the cloak.... And then he must, after all, have slept at his post; for the next thing he knew was coming to himself, with a great spasm and seeing, in a shaft of yellow sunlight, grey rock, brown earth, and Sidonia's golden head upon his knee. And, but a yard from her little sandalled foot, the horrible black chasm. Oh, shame! he had slept, and death lurking for her! The sweat started on his forehead.

* * * * *

A sigh of music was blown into the cavern. Sidonia turned her head and gazed up in his face with wide, bewildered eyes.

"It is Geiger-Hans," she murmured, and rubbed her eyes, as though she thought she were still dreaming. Then she sat up, looked round, and memory leaped back. She smiled, yawned, and drew herself together. "Well," she said, with a sidelong glance at the pit-mouth, "we have had luck, you and I! Don't you want to get out of this, Herr von Kielmansegg?" she asked briskly, as he sat wondering at her. "Or do you think it would be a nice place to turn hermit in? See, this is the way," said she, and pointed to a narrow and most insecure ledge skirting the deep; "we shall have to crawl on hands and knees. And, sir, I think our cloaks must be sacrificed."

As she spoke, she gathered them together and pushed them from her. They rolled down, and Steven almost called aloud as he heard their heavy plunge into the ambushed waters: it sounded as if some living thing had gone to its death.

"I will lead," said she.

Sunshine, sky, grass, wide airs! Till that moment Steven had never known what these things could mean to man. He sat on a sun-warmed rock by the side of the precipitous, all but obliterated pathway that led zigzag upwards to the broken rampart. Sidonia stood shaking and pruning herself like a bird, her hair glinting in the light. By tacit consent both paused upon this moment of physical relief before considering their next course. From above, the plaintive strain they had heard within their prison was again borne down towards them on the breeze. Sidonia's fingers, busy in her tresses, stopped. She bent her ear.

"It is Geiger-Hans. And that is my tune. He is seeking me!"

She curved her hands round her mouth and gave a long mountain cry. It rang clear and sweet, cleaving the pure morning air like the call of a bird. Instantly the restless melody stopped; and, as they stood looking up in expectation,

Steven almost called aloud as he heard their heavy plunge into the ambushed waters: it sounded as if some living thing had gone to its death.

Steven almost called aloud as he heard their heavy plunge into the ambushed waters: it sounded as if some living thing had gone to its death.

Sidonia stood, shaking and pruning herself like a bird, her hair glinting in the light.

they saw the figure of Geiger-Hans emerge on the rocks over their heads. Holding his fiddle high in the air, he came clambering down to them with the agility of a goat.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, as, breathless, he drew near. "Cruel children, what a fright you have given me!"

His cheek was pale under its bronze. Yet, in spite of its severity, his haggard eye was quick to note that these two were torn and dishevelled, that their smiles had the pallor which has faced death.

"What has happened?" cried he, in changed accents.

Sidonia broke into passionate complaint. A great lassitude was upon Steven; he did not wish to stir or speak; he listened in silence, as she poured forth the story tersely, yet with the vividness of her passion.

"And it was Uncle Ludo did it!" she ended, with a fresh gust of anger. "We heard him laugh as we fell. And Count Kielmansegg his guest!" Her pride could not stomach the thought; it was less to her, evidently, that her relative should have endeavoured to compass the death of wife as well as guest, for her anger dropped into mere shuddering pity as she added: "Poor Aunt Betty! Just think, if she had not sent me!"

Many expressions passed over Geiger-Hans' countenance as the drama unrolled itself before his quick mental vision. Thunder of anger, clouds of fear and doubt, tender admiration. He shot one lightning glance of inquiry at Steven; his brow cleared before the frank answering look.

As the girl finished, the two men sought silent intercourse with each other. The eyes of both had grown soft. For herself, the little fearless creature still had no thought, far less words.

"Well, friends," said the fiddler at last, sitting down on the slope and wiping his forehead with his sleeve, "you may flatter yourselves that you've given me no better night than your own. First, Sir Count, having a word to say to you, I made so bold as to take a seat in your carriage, as it waited down yonder. A moist time I had of it, in company with your lordship's horses and postilion. (By the way, this same postilion hath a varied choice of oaths.) Towards the small hours our relations became strained, and we parted; he back to the Silver Stork, and I—I will not conceal it—to wandering once more in the purlieus of this hospitable strong-house. For, although nothing was more natural than that a guest should have altered his intention of departing at the last moment, my mind misgave me."

"Poor Geiger-Onkel!" said Sidonia. "How wet you must be!"

"Nay, the night had turned fine then; it was the least of my hardships. But at dawn this restless spirit of mine set me to rousing the castle—and a fine time of it I have given them! His Excellency, however, was found dead drunk in his hall, so that I could get little out of him. The lady is convinced that you, comrade, have eloped with her niece, by some devious road——"

"Devious enough," said Steven, with a short laugh.

But Sidonia had become grave. "I am glad, at least, that he was drunk," she said, with judicial air.

"I left my Lady Burgravine planning hysterics. But I have given orders in the household, as if I were master of all. No flogging of Geiger-Hans now, nor setting of dogs upon him! 'Tis I command this morning. I have marshalled his Excellency's servants: there are some half-dozen fellows searching the rocks already. And here, by the way, comes one bright youth. Observe how he looks under the brambles and the bushes. He will not leave a mouse-hole unprodded for your corpses."

"Shall we not bid him get breakfast for us all?" cried Sidonia, gaily. "'Tis

the least Wellenshausen can do for you this morning, Herr Graf!"

She sprang upwards lightly, her small face, wan with fatigue, laughing back at them over her shoulder. The fiddler and Steven stood side by side watching her.

"Well," said the former, after a pause, "are you inclined to go and break bread again in the house whose stones plotted your death? Or will you take the safe way down the mountain to the cushions of your berline, and cry: 'Drive on, postilion'?"

Steven regarded the speaker a moment or two before replying. It seemed to the young man as if that long, black night had cut him off from his own purblind youth. He felt himself years older, weighted with life.

"I am going back to the Burg," he said, and set off climbing.

"Hey, comrade, hey, what haste?" panted the other at his ear. "What is your purpose up there? You've been there once too often." There was a certain anxiety under the speaker's mocking air.

"My purpose——" began Steven, coldly. He was about to add, "concerns you not," but on second thought he wheeled round, and all that had been gathering in his heart this night escaped in words of fire. "Why do you ask?" he cried. "You know! What! are you the man to whom the souls of others lie bare? Are you a man like myself, and do you think I can leave that child now? With her little hand she held me from death. She lay in my arms and slept and trusted me. Do you think I could endure myself if I thought I had left her unprotected here? If I give my whole life to the mere guardianship of her, shall I do more than my duty? Man!" cried Steven, catching the fiddler's sunburnt wrist and shaking him, "I tell you, the child lay in my arms all night."

"She is indeed a child," said the musician, quietly.

"And it is even for that!" exclaimed Steven. "Oh, I thought you would have understood!"

"Let us go up to the heights, then," said the fiddler.

"What, no music?" cried Sidonia, gaily, as she watched them coming, from the doorstep. "I expected to hear your fiddle chanting the song of delivery!"

"I have enough music in my soul this morning," replied the wanderer.

* * * * *

The Burgrave was a sorry spectacle. A man may play the mediæval avenger overnight, but in the morning he belongs to his own age and the sense of proportion reasserts itself. The Burgrave's awakening to sobriety, his realization of his own deed, were depressing to the direst degree. Paradoxically, no less terrible was the discovery that his suspicions had been unfounded; that his wife was

both virtuous and still of the living; that it was an innocent niece and an innocent guest whom he had precipitated to an awful doom. He almost betrayed himself on meeting the Burgravine.

"It was Sidonia, then—it was not you, the youth was after, all the time!" he exclaimed, bewildered.

"Me? After me?" cried the lady, in a virtuous fury. "How dared you think such a thing!"

She paused, panting, to measure the whole humiliation of her position.

Sidonia was gone—gone with the pretty Austrian boy whom she, Betty, had so determinedly marked as her own. It was an infamous trick, and for Sidonia to play it ... Sidonia! Bah! She, who knew herself so well, should not have placed faith in any woman.

"The minx was in love with him all the time," she babbled, "and he—he, oh, he well knew, no doubt, that no richer heiress would ever pass his way! I trust, Herr von Wellenshausen, that you have sent widely in pursuit." Her mind was working at a tremendous rate. "You have not let yourself be taken in by this cunning wretch's story—Geiger-Hans, or whatever his name is? Oh, I can tell you something of him, sir. There's an intriguer for you, and in Kielmansegg's confidence from the beginning! God alone knows what infamous bargains they may have made together! It has all been a plot."

The Burgrave stood looking at her, an abject mass of bilious misery.

"I am afraid there may have been an accident," he murmured, moistening his dry lips.

"Accident?" screamed she, and withered him. "You fool!" Then she turned on him, snarling like an angry little cat. "It is all your fault! Why did you ask him back here, to spy and pry? Yes, if the girl has disgraced us, it is your fault—the fault of your evil mind! You drove them to elope, old jealous fool!"

The Burgrave clenched his hands and shook them above his head, fell into a chair, and wept aloud. Elope? If she but knew! Alack, poor Sidonia! Poor little Sidonia! He had always loved the child.

"I trust you will come to soberness presently," said Betty, with a disgusted look at the row of empty bottles.

And it was at this moment that shouts from the courtyard proclaimed the return of the lost ones.

The Burgrave's ecstasy of relief, when he heard that his *oubliette*, had miscarried, could only be measured by his previous state of misery. He could have leaped and sung. He caught his wife to his breast with fresh tears. Repulsed with scorn, he tottered forth to the great hall, still reeling in his joy, to meet the two so miraculously preserved and restored.

The girl faced him, severe as a young Daniel, with pointed finger and flash-

ing eye.

"You weep now, uncle: you laughed last night! That was your farewell to us; you laughed as you tumbled us down the *oubliette*!"

The Burgrave had stepped back, dismayed afresh. She knew, then, that no mere accident had betrayed them! The wretched lord of the castle flung a look around; met the eyes of Steven, scornful—he knew! Met the fiddler's eyes, horribly mocking—he knew! Met his Betty's gaze, deeply suspicious. In a moment she, too, would know!

Out rang Sidonia's clarion tongue. And then the Burgravine did know.

Promptly he was delivered into her hands. She threatened him with King and Emperor, with family and justice, prison, madhouse, duel. The Emperor had put divorce in fashion, she reminded her lord. She would divorce him, resoundingly! The last taunt was—since, after all, he loved her in his own fashion—the blow that hit him hardest.

Natheless, even under the shock of the discovery that her own precious life had been in danger, and her husband (Bluebeard too well named!) had been her would-be murderer, her wits did not desert her.

She intercepted the gaze wherewith Steven followed Sidonia, and was quick to feel that for herself he had now scarce a thought; nay, that she but represented to him three days of intense discomfort and a disagreeable episode ending in death-peril. She must not act in a hurry. She must play what cards she had left in her hand to best purpose. She had a vision of a tamed Bluebeard—and compensation; her turn yet to come in gay Cassel.

"*Herr Graf*," said the Burgrave, not without some kind of dignity, though tears still swam in the pale, swollen eyes, and his great hands trembled, a pathetic spectacle, "I stand at your mercy. I have absolutely no excuse to offer you."

"Nay, sir," said Steven, "what misfortune Wellenshausen brought on me, Wellenshausen has repaired. Whenever I think," he added, and raised Sidonia's hand to kiss it, "of the night when you planned, and well-nigh encompassed, my death, I will also remember that to the courage of a daughter of this same house I owe my life. Before I take leave of your hospitable door" (he was too young to refrain from the gibe), "may I crave a few words in private?"

The Chancellor bowed. Steven pressed Sidonia's hand and followed his host as he shambled across the hall.

Had any one told the young man on the previous day that he would be willing—nay, anxious—to bind himself for all the years of his life to the little sunburnt Sidonia, he would have thought the absurdity scarce worth a laugh. And yet, here he was, a suitor for her hand. Her guardian dared not refuse her to him, even if a Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg had not been a match such as hardly could be found for her twice in a lifetime. He was bent on his purpose with all the

obstinacy of a nature somewhat slow to move, but firmly set once a resolution taken. It was perhaps hardly love so much that urged him as a kind of passionate chivalry. He had expressed the state of affairs very accurately to Geiger-Hans. He had guarded her in his arms a whole night; now he felt driven by all his manliness to guard her for the rest of her life. Yet, with all this sentimental fervour, there was mixed a shrewd common-sense. In race she was his equal. She had good blood in her veins; and, by heaven, the little creature had shown it! Her courage and pride appealed to his innermost fastidiousness of breeding. And, child as she was, wild creature, free of the wood, sisterly with the people of the soil, he had the intuition that she would bear her new honours not only loyally, but royally. To her fortune he actually gave not a thought. Once or twice, in his hearing, she had been mentioned as a great heiress, but the statement had made no impression. With all his faults, Steven was nothing so little as mercenary—rare enough a virtue with the rich man, even in youth.

With his blood-red stare fixed upon him, the Burgrave was uncomfortably and confusedly revolving certain questions connected with his ward's fortune. He had his own reasons for preferring to keep Sidonia unmarried for some years to come. But circumstances had passed out of his control. He could have but one answer for the curt, haughty, well-nigh insolent demand:

"Wellenshausen was honoured—they were honoured, honoured—–"

"With the briefest possible delay!" supplemented the lordly youth.

And again the Burgrave bowed acquiescence; for there was a threat in Steven's eye, merciless to any hesitation.

"Of course," cried Wellenshausen, suddenly catching at a straw, "this is subject to my niece's consent."

A faint smile came to Steven's lips; not fatuous, but mightily confident.

"That, your Excellency, is a matter between her and me," he said.

The other glowered. This smacked of England, and he disliked English customs. But, again, his helplessness overcame him. With a turn of the head, scarcely a bow, Steven then withdrew. His host, lately so arrogant, looked after him, gnashing his teeth, helpless and furious in his humiliation. The wooer had not approached the subject of the girl's portion, even when he had mentioned his own lordly rentals; an omission so strange that it but added to the Burgrave's general sense of discomfiture.

CHAPTER XIV

LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

"Well—if I bide, lo! This wild flower for me!"
(*Lancelot and Elaine*).

It was a glorious day, after a night of rain; and a blazing sun poured its rays down upon the rocks. Some instinct led Steven (he was perhaps already more of a lover than he believed) to the place where Sidonia sat, a ledge on the steep grassy slope which lay just outside the bramble-hidden opening of the cave—the cave that had yielded them back, in the dawn, to a new life.

She was alone, seated under the wall, in a child-like attitude, her chin in her hand, wrapt, it seemed, in profound cogitation. The sunshine brought a golden fire about her uncovered hair. Steven flung himself beside her. She did not move her head, merely turned her grave eyes upon him; and, for a while, there was silence between them.

The air was full of the humming of busy insects, sweet with the spices of the thousand thymy herbs that flourished in the dry, rocky soil. Above them the ruinous wing of the castle towered into the nebulous blue. Below, far away, the brown roofs of the village lay in shadow. Faint cries rose up from it; and from some unseen pasture, the tinkle of cow-bells—dim little sound, homely, yet so strangely in harmony with the solitudes of nature. The calls of the mountain birds came fitfully; and underlying all was the distant roar of the torrent seeking its issue far away from the secret well. Sidonia spoke at last.

"You have finished with them all, up there?" she asked.

"With them all, up there; yes," he answered her; and a joyousness was upon him, for which he could have given no reasons. It was born, perhaps, of his sudden entrance into the power of manhood—for protection, for conquest, for ownership. She, however, saw nothing of the flash in his eye, of the eager trembling of his lip.

"You could have Uncle Ludo put in prison, of course, but you will not do that. And that is the worst punishment of all. You leave him just with contempt.—It is a great humiliation for Wellenshausen!" she said.

For some moments he made no answer. He was considering with pleasure the delicate ear under the waving sweep of hair, the colour, weight and length of the plaits that, divided, hung on either side of her neck and tipped the ground. He was noticing the shape of the nails in the slight brown hands, the shadow of the eyelashes on the cheek, the arch of the foot, the slender beauty of which even the country shoe could not conceal. How blind he had been on their first meeting!

Geiger-Hans had, indeed, been justified in chiding him.... "She? a peasant girl! Then you never looked at her feet, nor at her delicate eyebrow. It is a noble child!"

Those eyes of hers that he had, even at their first meeting, compared to a mountain stream in their depth, their varying colour, were still fixed with gravity upon him.

"You looked for me to say good-bye?" she said simply.

"No," said Steven.

He drew himself a little closer to her, as he lay his length on the ground. The scent of the crushed weeds, the small aromatic nameless growths beneath him, sprang to his nostrils. He propped himself on his elbows and leaned his chin on his clasped hands, returning her gaze masterfully.

"Mademoiselle Sidonia, it is true that I am going soon, but I do not mean to go away alone. I have told your uncle how unfit I consider him to be your guardian. He cannot dispute the point with me, and he has owned that you ought to have another. Will you trust me to take care of you?" The eyes fixed upon him widened, questioning, innocent, yet profound. "I should call you my wife," he went on in a low voice, all astonished himself that his heart should suddenly beat so fast. Her glance never wavered, but he could see the scarlet dye her cheek. "Sidonia, will you come with me?" he cried. And now he was on his knees, quite close to her.

"I will go with you," she replied.

Her child eyes were still upon him and seemed to ask for something yet. And at this, he bent and kissed her, gently, as he would have kissed a child, and did not guess that, at the touch of his lips, Sidonia's woman's soul was born.

The autumn month was kind to the short, bewildering time of Steven and Sidonia's betrothal, and gave them, day after day, a fair sky and joyous sunshine.

It was something of a strange business. Steven ascended the crag at least twice in the twelve hours to meet his little bride, up in the blue, among the rocks or the ruins. He had decided not to break bread again with the Burgrave, not even to enter the Burg until the wedding morning; and Sidonia approved this stern decision. And so their wooing had for its setting the barren crags, the scanty verdure, the keen airs of Wellenshausen heights; its only witnesses the great ravens, and occasionally some soaring hawk, cruising watchful and keen, pirate of the high seas of blue. Thus Sidonia became associated in Steven's mind with the pungent scents of all mountain herbs, the briskness of all mountain breezes. He could have sworn that about her small person itself there was a myrtle fragrance.

Her presence became as grateful as the wild nature about him, and made as

few demands upon him. Of love-making, in the accepted sense, there was none between them. He touched her still as reverently as he had touched the sleeper in the *oubliette*. He could not disabuse himself of the feeling that she was under his protection; that he must guard her, innocent, confident, maiden, sprite, child; guard her even from himself, from his man's knowledge, his man's power. It was instinct, not calculation, that kept him within such idyllic bounds. But, as it was, he felt mightily pleased with himself and consequently with her. Through some vein of idealism—richest treasure of youth as yet unrealized—his whole nature was flattered with the sense of his own chivalry, with the delicacy of the poem. Never for an instant did he repent his impulsive bargain.

So long as there was such content in his eyes, there was content deep and full in Sidonia's heart. Her confidence in him was unlimited. He had asked her to be his wife: therefore he loved her, and his way of love was perfect in her mind. His parting and meeting kiss—often enough laid fugitively upon her eyelids—was to her the utmost and happiest expression of tenderness.

* * * * *

So passed these odd, quiet, yet all-important hours of courtship. And then the day came, eve of the morrow when they were to be united up in yonder bare stone chapel of the Burg, that was never used save for the baptism, the burial, or the wedding of a Wellenshausen.

Again Sidonia sat among the rocks and the wild herbs, but alone: Steven was engaged in conclave with the ruddy-faced pastor of the hamlet, who was to ride up on his mule in the morning and conduct the ceremony. She smiled happily, as she pictured the interview in her mind. Presently she became aware that she was no longer by herself. From the black shadow of the rock, across the patch of sward opposite to her, eyes were watching her from a lean, sharp-featured face. She gave a small, low laugh.

"I see you," she said.

And Geiger-Hans came forward with a kind of leap from the rocky gloom. He sat cross-legged in the full sunshine before her, his arms folded. His fiddle was slung at his back; his garments were powdered with dust; he looked tired and travel-worn, as if he had come from a long distance. But he was smiling at her.

"Truly, it is a curious thing," he said, as if taking up the thread of some interrupted conversation, "that the first time we ever met, little Mamzell Sidonia, you addressed me in just these very words."

"That must have been very long ago, Onkel," said Sidonia, "for I always remember you."

"Nay, it was an epoch to me. You see, mamzell, I was not then Geiger-Onkel to the country-side, the Geiger-Onkel whom the children run up to, whom the silly maids and youths consult, and the old wives like to gossip with—the old, crazy fellow, who makes merry music and does nobody any harm. I had black misery in my heart in those days, and black misery on my face. And I can well believe," said the fiddler, after a pause, "that I seemed to shed a black curse about me as I passed. I was a restless mortal, and went about, hither, thither, at a terrible pace. The people took me for a wandering devil! And, upon my soul, I don't blame them." He gave a laugh, and the sound of it hurt Sidonia. She had always known, of course, that it was some fearful sorrow that had driven her old friend to his life of wandering.

"Oh, poor Geiger-Onkel!" she cried; the caress of her eyes was infinitely soft.

"Yes, the women crossed themselves when they saw me!" He laughed again. "The men jeered—the children ran screaming from my path.... That day when I saw you first, mamzell, I was tired and angry. A stone had been flung at me and caught me on the ankle, and I went lame. The day was very hot; I had been a long way; I could go no further, and I was hungry. I sat outside the forest-house, waiting to ask for a crust. I had heard you laughing and calling behind the garden hedges, and I was afraid of frightening you.... Aye, it was weary work, going through the world making the children cry! I knew that, when the sun sank, somebody would put you to bed. 'And then I shall knock,' I said to myself.... But, all at once, little Mamzell Sidonia, as I sat, oh, so glum, so black-hearted, so forlorn a wretch, I heard you call me. You had popped your head out of the garden gate, and were peeping at me, gurgling with laughter. 'I see you,' you said." His voice broke. He twisted himself and lay out-stretched, supporting himself on one arm, his face turned towards the ground, idly picking at the small herbs. "Your little head was all over golden curls ... some one I had known had hair of that colour ... and you looked at me, it seemed, with eyes I had known also. You were not in the least frightened; you thought, I believe, that I was a very good game. But to me, to me, Mamzell Sidonia—you see I was even madder then than I am now—you were a something sent to me from one I loved once."

Sidonia held her breath. She did not dare speak. This was not the Geiger-Onkel she had known. His very voice was changed utterly. She could not see his face as he lay, but instinctively she turned her eyes away from the prone figure.

"If we had had a child," said the fiddler, in a sort of whisper, "she would have looked like you ... she would have looked like you!"

It seemed to Sidonia that the lean figure was shaken, and she had a terror lest he should be weeping. But, all at once, with those singular, quick movements of his, so startling to those who did not know him, he was sitting once more

cross-legged; and the eyes that fixed her were dry and wildly brilliant.

"Now, if only the Burgrave was here, and could have heard me," he cried, mocking, "would he not be justified in calling for those whips and dogs with which I have been threatened? The Baroness Sidonia von Wellenshausen compared with the brat of a crazy beggarman!"

Sidonia exclaimed indignantly: "Whips and dogs! He would never dare!"

"Well, hardly just now," said the other, whimsically. "His Excellency will dare very little for some time to come. Hey, what a game have the Fates played with him; aye, and with us all, mamzell, even with me, who thought to guide them! But they played my game in the end," he added, edging a little closer to her. "Well, little sleeping beauty with the golden hair, did I not do well to bring you to your forest bower this gallant young prince? You had to be awakened, *Princesse Sidonie au bois dormant*; for the end of the spell was near at hand. And if you had been awakened by the wrong knight? Heaven preserve us, what a catastrophe!"

"Oh, Geiger-Onkel, I am not a child any more to be talked to in fairy tales. I am going to be married to-morrow!" Then, with a sudden change of tone, the girl cried inconsequently, "It is true, you did bring him to me. Perhaps you're a kind of wizard uncle, after all!"

"Why—and have you ever doubted it?" said he, menacing her with his finger. "Have I not watched you all these years? When you wanted me for anything—for the white doe that was lost, or for Liserl in the village, when she had no news of her lad, or when Aunt Hedwige kept you too close—had not you but to wish for me?"

"It is true," she pondered, and looked at him doubtfully, unable to make out if he were in jest or in earnest.

"And so, when I met this fine young Prince Errant on the roadway, I knew he was meant for you."

But suddenly she accused him, shaking her little finger in mimicry of his own gesture.

"But you vanished very quickly, the other morning, after you played us out of the *oubliette*, Geiger-Onkel. And my prince had to face the wicked guardian all by himself, and you were not even there to tell the princess what she was to say. You have not been near us all these days."

"But, did you want me?" cried the fiddler, and gave a screech of laughter. It rang harshly. "Did you want me? That is the question."

She found nothing to answer. Truthfully, she had, these days, forgotten his very existence. He chuckled to himself, and hitched his violin round.

"Listen," said he, and began to play a dainty measure—so exquisitely tender-gay a measure that it made Sidonia, all in her young happiness, feel quite sad.

"Listen; this is the first tune you ever danced to, little mamzell. That was how your steps went, and how you clapped your hands.... Oh, I have something better for you still to play to you.... But you must wait for it. It is the song of your bridal morning!"

The sun fell full on his face as he played. How weary he looked, how aged, how haunted, and yet how gentle—poor Geiger-Hans!

CHAPTER XV

FURENS QUID FEMINA POSSIT

"*Et, dans leurs jalousies, vous trouverez toujours*
Leurs vanités blessées plutôt que leurs amours."
DESTOUCHES.

The mind of Burgravine Betty was a weather-vane, gilt and fantastically wrought, that veered in ever contrary directions, as blew the wind of her mood. Of constant purposes she knew but one, that of her own pleasure. But what course of action would best minister to this was a matter of perpetual indecision. She had amused herself with rare gusto, after months of enraging dulness, with the handsome stranger who had so impertinently sought the hospitality of Wellenshausen. And though a sermon from that crazy person the fiddler—no doubt a gentleman in masquerade, or Betty was no judge of such point—had left her momentarily abashed, sentimental over rocking cradles and wifely duty and such-like unprofitable conventions, the next morning the little shining vane was setting straight for the soft west of dalliance, and she fully meant to cheat her Bluebeard by as complete an *affaire de coeur* as circumstances would permit. Nay, while apparently taking virtuous farewell over night of the unexpected kinsman, she had already planned heaven knows what secret assignations, palpitating meetings in the shadow of the ruins, descents into the forest-land and green picnics in discreet glades, yea, even excursions into the deepest of the woods. But the secret departure of the degenerate Kielmansegg and the unwelcome appearance of a tactless husband had shattered these agreeable projects. And Betty's vane had flown to north again: cold virtue in an injured wife, most wrongfully suspected. Next, by her husband's odious tricks of suspicion, thrown once again

into the company of good looks and young manhood, what a succession of small hot and cold breezes kept the weather-cock shifting east, south-east and south, back to west again! Positively driven to elope, by sheer dread of the fate of Desdemona under her own cushions, what better choice could be made than this Steven von Waldorff-Kielmansegg—rich, high-born, and so vastly personable? And in Vienna, these times, people scarcely could look askance at a *divorcée*.

Yet, a rainy night, and some more of that ubiquitous fantastic musician's nonsense, and hey for a new quarter of the compass again! She could scarcely, however, regret the chill wind of reason that had shifted her purpose at the last hour—a night in the *oubliette*, even with a charming companion, coincided by no means with Betty's ideas of enjoyment. And then, not having the knowledge of the murderous locality acquired by that climbing kid Sidonia, she and Count Steven might well be swirling, this sunny moment, in undesired comradeship under the black waters of the pit. Betty shuddered in every fibre of her ease-loving body.

Now, during these days of Sidonia's brief betrothal, the Burgravine was in a more than usually undecided and dissatisfied frame of mind. Nevertheless, her mood pointed steadily for Cassel. As a Bluebeard, there could be no doubt of it, the Burgrave's occupation was gone. He was abject under his Betty's sandal. And Betty's foot, for so little a one, could stamp curiously hard. Henceforth the husband who would have compassed her murder had (the Burgravine fondly believed) no choice but to be his wife's slave. Dared he but thwart the smallest of her wishes, she knew well now how to reduce him to obedience. Cassel it was to be. Cassel, so soon as this absurd wedding was over.

A very sulky shoulder did the Burgravine turn upon the whole ridiculous affair. An errant squire of dames, dull, undiscriminating, ill-mannered youth, who, when a Betty was within the same horizon, could have the poor taste even to look at a Sidonia; to take up a hoyden, sun-burnt as a peasant child, and with as much idea of the refinements of life as the village chits with whom she was wont to make so free! A pretty show would she make of herself in Vienna!

The Burgravine had a curious glitter in those eyes of hers, that generally astonished the stranger by their flower-blue in her olive face; yet, withal, she was full of smiles. Was it not the wedding-day of the Baroness Sidonia, her husband's niece?

Never had the Burg, on its dominating height, seen a bride go forth from its "honour gate" to the ancestral chapel with so little ceremony. Great carouse had there been at the castle on similar occasion, loud ringing of joy bells, and belching of powder smoke from the ramparts, wide flaunting of the old blue and yellow

banner over the belfry. High folk, thickly gathered in Wellenshausen's Burg, had drunk deep on the height; low folk in Wellenshausen Dorf, on the plain, had vied successfully with their betters. The glories of the weddings at Wellenshausen had been retailed from father to son. Yet this last bride of the house, heiress as she was to most of its honours, slipped from her chamber to the altar-steps with scarce the tinkling of the chapel-bell to mark her passage, and only the cries of one or two village children, hot from their scramble up the crag, to acclaim her, the smiles, tearful, motherly and portentous, of the forest-mother to brace her for the great plunge into the unknown. Such was the haste and privacy with which the compact was carried out. The imperious bridegroom had willed it so. Nevertheless, if ungraced by pomp and unwitnessed by honoured guests, the ceremony was impressive enough in the simplicity and earnestness of the two chiefly concerned.

So thought the musician, who knelt hidden, all in the dust, between the tomb of the greatest of the old Wellenshausens and the chapel wall. He had refused the post of honoured guest, the prominent seat prepared by Sidonia herself, the proffer of Steven's dark suit and purple stockings.

"I shall be with you all the same, my children," he had promised them. And from his place of concealment nothing escaped his watchful anxiety. It did his heart good to catch a glimpse of the bridegroom's face as it was turned upon the bride. Never, it seemed to him, had Sidonia looked more completely the child. She went through the ordeal with a blithe serenity; he knew that the music he had made for her that morning, at the misty dawn, was singing in her heart.

At the sight of her golden head under the bridal veil, the vagabond closed his restless eyes for a minute. An inner vision of poignant tenderness rose upon him. "O Love, O Death, how the wheel turns with us!"

To the bowing snuff-coloured notary from Helmstadt, the Burgrave in his glittering Chancellor's uniform was a very awe-inspiring person: he quailed under the unblinking gaze of His Excellency, beneath the jealous eyebrows. Far indeed was he from suspecting that the merest glint of the Burgravine's blue orbs—so youthful, so affable an apparition to the dusty man of law—sufficed to make Wellenshausen, the terrible, quail in his tall boots.

Kurtz the Jäger whistled between his teeth, with an impudent eye on the wedding procession, as, in company with Mademoiselle Eliza, he beheld it pass out.

"It is your mistress whose little game has fallen through," said he, tauntingly, to the French girl.

"Ah, no, *par exemple*," retorted she. "It is your master, *mon bel oiseau*, who wears the fool's cap this time. Oh!"—she clapped her sallow hands together—"how we shall amuse ourselves at Cassel!"

It could hardly be said that the wedding repast was a convivial event. Steven took upon himself a great air of condescension over this first breaking of bread at the table of his would-be executioner. His politeness was something quite overpowering. The Burgrave, after a bumper of Sillery to the health of the happy pair, essayed to carry matters with a high-handed joviality; the effect of it, against Steven's glacial indulgence, was ghastly. But, when bridegroom and bride conferred together, were it upon the merest trifle, the irresponsible youth and joy of them was not to be hidden. And Burgravine Betty watched with a glance that grew ever more steely.

She had sat down to the board in a fairly good humour, for her amber gown was becoming, and the water gardens, the statued alleys of Cassel Palace, were growing into nearer perspective. But Cousin Kielmansegg positively treated her in much the same high-horse manner as he treated his host. The most alluring twists of her shoulder, the most killing ogles, were received with odious civility; nay—and her vanity was pierced to the core—she actually caught in him a look of boredom, when he had perforce to turn and give his attention to a delicate whisper, reminiscent innuendo, sigh for the might-have-been.

Fury rose in her, sudden as a mountain whirlwind. She gripped her wine-glass: the sweetness turned acid on her lips. Loud rang her laugh; and the Burgrave, glancing at her, felt a satisfaction in the ever-doubtful growling depth of his heart that his Betty should be so merry at her Beau Cousin's wedding. But Sidonia flung her aunt a startled look. The Burgravine sprang to her feet with a peremptory gesture:

"Come with me," she said.

She was in a prodigious hurry, all at once, to get the new Countess Kielmansegg away from the table into the privacy of her own turret apartment, ostensibly to robe her for the journey. The bridegroom followed his bride with a long glance; noting which, the Burgravine tossed her head.

"You must have a little patience," she cried to him insolently. "She will be ready in an hour."

Once alone with the girl, she whisked the bridal veil from her head with such feverish and ungentle hands that Sidonia turned round to look upon her in amazement, only to meet a positive glare.

"Why, Aunt Betty!"

"Why, Sidonia!—forgive, I should say: Most High Lady Countess!"

"What is the matter with you?" cried Sidonia.

She was never one to take hostility in meekness. The colour sprang to her cheek.

"Why do you look at me like that? What has vexed you?" she insisted.

"Vexed?—I?" quoth the lady. Here they were interrupted by Eliza, all

flounce and bounce and smile, with pink bows to her apron and a jaunty new cap. Her mistress turned upon her fiercely. "Get out of this! When you are wanted you shall be called," she cried. Then: "Nay, my love," she proceeded, once more addressing her niece, now in a biting tone of sweetness (a diabolic inspiration had come to her: if Satan can never unmake, he can at least mar) "nay, wherefore should I be vexed? I may be ashamed for my sex; I am still, I must confess, under the shock of the recent scandal, which has rendered necessary this humiliating marriage, but——"

Sidonia went white to the lips. "I don't understand——" she cried boldly; but there was horror gathering in her eyes.

"Do you need to be told, then," asked the other, clapping her plump hands together in exasperation, "that if a young girl spends a night in a cave alone with a young man, her reputation is not worth a silver groat?"

The blood raced back to the bride's cheeks. "Do you taunt me for having saved your life, Aunt Betty? What say I?—saved *your* reputation.... But what does it matter; how does this concern me now? My husband loves me; he has my faith."

The Burgravine broke into shrill laughter. Then, with a sudden change of tactics, she folded her niece to her heart with hysterical tenderness.

"Nay, my poor lamb, I am wrong! Go, go in your touching confidence; I will say no further word. It would be cruel to enlighten you a day sooner than necessary, and——"

"I think you're mad," interrupted the bride. "I cannot imagine what you mean." With steady fingers she removed the myrtle wreath from her head, then approached her aunt with a countenance singularly altered. "You must explain yourself, Aunt Betty," she said.

The Burgravine rushed again into passion. "Were you the innocent you pretend to be," retorted she, panting, "it would be no kindness to let you depart in ignorance of the true state of your affairs. But, for all your baby pose, you cannot make me believe, my love, that you are blind to the fact that this poor, chivalrous young man has only wedded you, all said and done, to save your name, your honour. A—ah, he has vowed, and you believe him, that he loves you?" (It is well to lash oneself into blind anger when it is difficult to strike in cold blood.) "Ten days ago, on that very turret platform," she dramatically pointed through the window to the silhouette of the east tower, "only ten days ago he held me to his heart—this devoted lover of yours—and consecrated his life to me!"

"I do not believe you," said Sidonia, again. But her soft, young face seemed suddenly turned to marble. "If he loves you, what does he want with me?" The girl spoke slowly. She had been shaken, but she was not convinced. "I don't believe it, Aunt Betty," she resumed. "Nobody would have said any harm of me.

Every one knows me here! Wellenshausen," cried the child, in angry common-sense, "is not Vienna, nor yet Cassel!"

Betty, who possessed the faculty of changing her mind with ease, had no bashfulness at all in eating her own words when occasion offered. Indeed, so accommodating was her disposition that she was quite ready to believe her own hasty concoctions, however contradictory, at a moment's notice. Shrewish blew the gusts of the jealous temper.

"Well, *mon coeur*, is it not better to think him an excellent chivalrous person than to try and seek for less noble motives? 'Tis granted, isn't it, that since he loved me at nine o'clock in the evening, loved me to the point of elopement, he could hardly be ready to love you very devotedly at eight the next morning? We will not think that my Bluebeard dropped him a hint of your money bags.... The situation was delicate, you see, and if the Burgrave, who is fond of you after all, my dear, and who, no doubt, wanted to repair the damage he had wrought, failed to move the young gentleman by one plea, he may have succeeded in another. There are compensations about you: that is a fact. It was after their private conversation, remember, my little angel, that Beau Cousin proposed...."

Sidonia set her teeth in her trembling lip. Every word was a dagger wound to pride and love and maidenliness. Then all her loyalty revolted. Her knight of the forest, so base? Never! And if the Burgravine was false in the one instance, why not in all?

"Aunt Betty," she said deliberately, "this is all a lie."

"Fool," snapped Betty. She ran from the room like a fury, to return with incredible quickness. She shook a crumpled note before the bride's eyes, then spread it with frenzied fingers upon the table.

"See here! Read! read what he writes to me—to me! Ah, you know his handwriting by this time! Read, read! He asks me to meet him among the ruins. 'All will be ready!' What does that mean, think you? Why, that his coach was waiting ready for us at the foot of the hill, to whirl us two to our own land, to safety, to happiness!"

The girl reeled and pressed her hands to her eyes.

"Why, my dear," cried the other, pursuing her advantage mercilessly, "did he ever blink at you, I ask, before that disgraceful night in the dark? And indeed, how could fine young men such as he, I should like to know, find anything to fall in love with in you, you poor little country, weather-beaten thing? No, my poor child, no, you had best take it that he's just doing the recognized high-born, gentlemanly thing by you; but it will do you no harm to remember that it was me, me, that he wanted to take away from Wellenshausen, not you!"

"Then why did you not go—why did you send me to him, with your good-bye?" asked Sidonia at last, almost voiceless.

"Because I was a fool," exploded the Burgravine, in all the inconsequence of her envy.

At this particular moment it seemed to her that in her virtuous decision she had indeed missed the opportunity of her life. And she set her teeth upon such savage accents of truth that, at last, Sidonia believed.

She took the crumpled bit of paper from the table. Stunned amid the ruins of her fair edifice of happiness, she had as yet hardly realized her aunt's position, even though so shamelessly trumpeted. Now, with this proof of Steven's real feelings in her hand, Betty's guilt suddenly leaped, hideous, into shape before her.... The Burgravine von Wellenshausen, a married woman, ready to break her marriage vows, listening to words of love from the guest under her husband's roof! The bride was very innocent, but innocence is perhaps the severest judge of all. She turned eyes of horror upon her uncle's wife.

"It is well," she said, after a pause. "Leave me; I must think out what I have to do."

As she spoke she thrust the note into the bosom of her bridal frock.

To be thoroughly successful in revenge is always slightly alarming. So thought the Burgravine as she closed the door upon this unknown, this strange Sidonia. But, having gone too far to retreat, spite now resolved to reap the final gratification.

CHAPTER XVI

'TWIXT CUP AND LIP

"Warum sind benn die Rosen so blass?
* * * * *
Mein liebes Liebchen, sprich,
D sprich, mein herzallerliebstes Lieb,
Warum verliessert du mich?"
HEINE.

Steven and his host sat opposite each other, equally mute. After his spurt of hilarity, the Burgrave had gradually fallen into a moodiness fostered by draughts of an alarming variety of wines. Sunk into himself, his heavy chin upon his chest,

he glared straight before him with suffused eyes, blood-injected—a sodden mass of helpless resentment.

Fastidious Steven, ever more wrapt in disdain and aloofness, had perforce to avert his gaze from the degraded spectacle. How came such a flower as his Sidonia grafted upon so coarse a stock? He rejoiced, with a glow of intimate self-approbation, that he was carrying her away to fitter surroundings. To whom might they not have wedded her? To some sproutling, no doubt, chosen by the Burgrave—by yonder sot! Into what brutal arms might they not have cast her—the pure child of the cave night?

Something called him from his musings: it was the measure of an odd little tune, played half-sourdine, half-pizzicato. Suddenly the image of a rosy mountain-side, a gold-dusted plain spreading away towards sunset, the gloom of a forest background, sprang before his mind. He saw in the midst of that scene a gloomy youth seated on a milestone, a disabled chaise, a grey horse ... and up the hill, advancing towards him, the vagabond fiddler. A broken sun ray flashed back from the yellow varnish of his instrument ... a robin sang ... the white horse cropped the leaves of young grass, with contented munching sound. The stream ran tinkling like secret laughter. Oh, what strange things had been brought into this traveller's life through the breaking of a linchpin on the Thuringian high-way! He sprang to his feet. Surely Geiger-Hans was calling him!—The Burgrave never even shifted his eyes to watch his new nephew go.

Steven found the fiddler at the head of the downward path; and though he was seated, there was an air of travel about him. He was alone. The charm of his music had no power that day at Wellenshausen; fleshpots and drinking cans filled the household mind. The young man's heart contracted; he had learned to feel strange attachment for his strange comrade.

"I knew you were playing a good-bye," he cried. "Will you not wait and see us go?"

The fiddler's eyes flung his glance, uneasily, to where the white road cleared the shadowy green of the fields below and dipped into the dark bluish lap of the forest.

"No, no; I must go!" he answered, wildly, Steven thought.

"Without seeing Sidonia again?" exclaimed the young man.

The fiddler laughed inconsequently. He was now playing a kind of jig, almost on one string, a restless hopping measure which suddenly made Steven long to be gone likewise.

"Two fine mules are waiting for you," said the musician, with a quick look. "They have hung Sidonia's with flower-wreaths. And you have red trappings on yours. Hark! you can hear them jingle their bells. They are impatient, they are waiting for you. Hey, bridegroom, why do you delay? You should have been

gone as soon as you had made her yours."

"She is dressing for the journey," said Steven.

"Look," said Geiger-Hans, pointing with his bow, "yonder, by the torrent bridge stands your carriage. You can see the sun gleam on the harness. If you had my ears, you would hear your horses stamp. They, too, are impatient. But the bride will cling to the old stones at the last ... and, fie, who would hurry a lady? I shall be far, far away before you two set out. Nay, keep me not back, I am more impatient for the road than even your horses down there, fiery with the week's oats ... than even you, comrade, on your wedding day!"

"Certainly," thought Steven, uneasily, "if ever I doubted it before, the poor fellow is not as other men. How his eyes burn in their deep sockets—I fear our Geiger-Hans is mad."

At this the other nodded to him, with his fantastic intuition.

"You are right, I am mad," he said, "and I thank God—for it is a dull world for wise fools. And your sanity and wisdom and dulness, Sir Count, have learned something worth the learning of my madness. Aye, and received something better than knowledge too: you will grant that." And as Steven stared, half-offended, half-startled, the fiddler, with his smile upon him and his brilliant eyes, fell to playing again that tune of the road with which he had first greeted him.

"Here is a dull lad seated upon a mile-stone," he half chanted to the cadence, "and he has nothing better to do with his youth than to jog along the plain's highway, the dusty common road that all may tread ... while behind him runs the green path of the forest, and dear adventure lies in hidden glade for him who cares to seek it—so goodly a youth to waste his golden minutes! ... And here comes a wandering music-maker, and a crazy one into the bargain. And this is his freak: to see if he cannot knock a spark out of the high-born block. Within the youth of this goodly body lurks there no soul to fire? And, behold, it proves a good scholar—a very honest lad! Sparks are struck out of his block head. And there is a soul too, and it can burn with a very brave flame.... And in the forest glade trembles a Wind-Flower; let him pluck it if he can and wear it in his breast, for his is a steady hand and a clean, and it will gather the flower tenderly."

The fiddler clapped his hand on the strings and they were mute.

"Farewell, little comrade," he said, changing his tone, and Steven thought that if the man's eyes had had tears in them, the sadness of them would have been less intolerable. "Haste back to your bride, impatient heart!" added the musician gravely then. "A little impatience is good. But, oh, hear me:—hurry not her virginal dawn, that the sunrise be full golden for you both! If love is to have its exquisite hour, love must be both patient and fierce." He slung his violin over his shoulder, and took a sudden nimble step on the downward rocky way.

The half-hour struck, echoing from the gateway clock. A dreary quarter

still to wait, according to the Burgravine's warning.

"Oh, comrade, stay a little yet!" cried the bridegroom.

The fiddler merely waved his hand. He was scrambling down the steep way in crazy haste.

"I have a thousand things to say still," cried Steven again. He curled his hand round his mouth and called: "When shall we meet?"

The fiddler halted suddenly. He was already far on his way, for he had gone with incredible speed. But he waved his hat above his head with a fantastic flourish; then he shot behind a big rock and was lost to sight.

It seemed to Steven that it was an uncompromising good-bye, and it was with an odd sense of oppression that he turned his own steps back towards the gateway. He would have struck any other man to the earth who had dared once to insult, browbeat, or command him as this poor wanderer had so often done. Where lay the spell? He had power over all that came in contact with him; and—it was true—what marvellous things had he had to give! The young man's heart began to throb as he thought of his bride, and he quickened his step.... The Wind-Flower, that was his at last, his Fair Dawn!

The bridegroom entered with eager yet reverent step; but, upon sight of the bride, checked his advance, startled, amazed. Sidonia sat on a high-backed chair as on a judgment-seat, with face coldly set, yet with eyes blazing reproach.

"I sent for you, *Herr Graf*," she said, with great distinctness of enunciation, "to tell you that I decline to go away with you."

The blood rushed to Steven's brain. "I do not understand," he said, even as she but a little while before; and his tone was that of sudden anger. The revulsion of feeling was too strong, too sudden; his first emotion was overwhelming wrath. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Steel cannot strike steel but the sparks must fly. A fierce pride had they both. Perhaps Sidonia, in her child-heart, had looked for consternation on her bridegroom's face, had pictured him thunderstruck, protesting, falling at her feet; her wounded vanity now was reinforced by a host of unknown feelings which rushed almost for hatred. Under this arrogant eye, to this haughty bidding, she would not stoop to explanation, still less to complaint.

"It is sufficient that you should understand," she told him, "that now we part. I do not go with you. Go you and forget me!"

"Sidonia!" he ejaculated, stupefaction for the moment sweeping all other feelings away.

Strangely enough, it never dawned upon him to guess at the truth. Men, especially young men who have had practically no dealings with the opposite

sex, are very slow to grasp woman's spitefulness, woman's deceit. He had felt shame at his own weakness of compliance in the matter of the Burgravine, but no sense of guilt could remain where he knew all desire to sin to have been so conspicuously absent. He stood staring at Sidonia's little face convulsed with frowns.

"Oh, sir," she cried, with a disdainful laugh, "you have done all that honour required of you. It is quite enough. We need make no fine phrases for each other's benefit. The situation is very clear, and thereupon we may separate!"

At these inconceivable words a horrible suspicion sprang upon him; he did not pause to measure the probabilities, to contrast what he knew with what he did not understand. Was it possible that this young creature had but played a part with him? Had she feigned sweet maiden love and wedded him, virginally tender, only to save the threatened honour of her name? Nay; more monstrous thought still! Was the whole business a hideous conspiracy? He was shaken as by a storm. Crimson rushed to his face. In two strides he was beside her menacing.

"You are my wife!" he cried. "You are mine—mine! You belong to me! You must do as I order—as I order!"

His look filled her with terror. Child-woman, she shrank instinctively from something to her nameless, yet infinitely offending. Clasping her hands upon her breast to still the throbbing of her heart, she heard, beneath her fingers, the whisper of Aunt Betty's billet.

Stung afresh to scorn, she reared her head and measured him with her glance. In silence she stood, trying to reason out the tangled problem for herself. With her ignorance of life, her inborn pride, with her passionate woman's heart and her childish mind, she was bound to go far and wide astray.

If the marriage on his part was not a mere piece of chivalrous self-sacrifice, an idea unbearably insulting in itself, why should he now wish to keep her against her will, since the conventions were satisfied? What gain could she be to him, since he did not love her? And how could he love her, he who was in love with Betty? As in a vision of red flame, she recalled how he and Betty had danced and coquetted together that first night of all; he had not had even a glance wherewith to recognize the little Sidonia who had waited on him in the forest house. Oh, it was true, he had loved Betty from the beginning. And she, Sidonia, who had let herself be won by a few careless words, was at the best only a sacrifice to the world's idea of high-born, gentlemanly decorum. The memory of these last days, so exquisite to her, was blighted. She had never been anything to him, that was clear. He had been kind to her, indulgent, but he had never once, she remembered now, told her that he loved her. And she, fool! had never realized, even with Betty's example before her, that people could seek to wed each other without love. Out of her own mad abundance she had lent to him. And the

poor little coin he had doled out in return to her, she had taken for gold. But now, why should he look at her with those fierce, greedy eyes? Why should this "poor, chivalrous young man," as Betty called him, claim her as his bargain, and in these brutal tones?

Once more Betty's voice, with its devilish suggestion, rang in her ears: *Of course, my love, there are compensations about you!*

"You can have my money if you will—and I am very rich, as you know—so that you only go. Go!" she cried suddenly.

Sidonia shook from head to foot as she spoke at last. But her eyes and her voice were indomitable in their determination. As if her slender sunburnt hand had struck him a deadly blow, Steven Lee, Count Kielmansegg, stepped back a couple of paces, and the blood, ebbing from his face, left it grey. He paused for a while, then made a bow, turned on his heel, and went to the door. On the threshold he looked back at her for a second again. It was a farewell look, and bore in it a pride as high and bleeding as her own, a reproach as keen. She saw that his lip trembled. Then the door was closed, very gently, between them, and she heard his steps die away down the winding stone stairs.

She glanced at her new wedding-ring and thought her heart must break, but yet she sat and made no effort to recall him.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SKIRT OF WAR

"And there was mounting, in hot haste, the steed.
The mustering squadron and the clattering car
Went pouring forward with impetuous speed..."
BYRON.

It was a day of scurrying breezes and dappled skies. Long pools reflected blue and white in the ruts of his Majesty King Jerome of Westphalia's neglected highway. Wide and deep ruts they were, tracks of the "Grand Army" that had been; and even a village child could have told that great guns and waggons had passed that way before the sweeping by of the last spring storm.

But the rider, on his big-boned, iron-grey horse, splashed through the mud

at reckless speed. He had no thought for the story of the wounded country road. Its tragic significance would have left him unmoved had he understood. Such experience as he had just been through changes the whole world in a man's eyes: he becomes as one who, a moment before in perfect health, finds himself shattered by some disabling accident—nothing in life can ever look, ever feel the same again. He had wrenched himself free of love's snare as the wild thing of the woods from the teeth of the springe; but at what vital hurt, how maimed, how bruised, how deeply marked! What was it to him that the west wind, dashing against his face, was balmy with the breath of the black pinewoods on the rising slopes to his right; that the rank meadows that fell away to the left were colour alive, gold-green in the sunlight; that shadows swept across them like spirit messages? His ears were deaf to the organ chant of the pines, to the shrill call of the bird echoing back from the blue vault. Unmoved, he trotted through the poverty-stricken villages, by the deserted homesteads, once flourishing, beside the wasted cornfields. One whom life was treating as evilly as himself could not be expected to bestow even the alms of a pitying thought to the peasant soldiers, stiff in the snows of Russia, or plodding, vanquished at last, in Spanish rocky deserts, nor to the starving families to whom the breadwinner would never return. He did not even care whither he was hurrying, so long as he crossed the nearest frontier of a country to him accursed. To this goal all the passions of his mind were pointed.

* * * * *

With head bent towards the wind, and fiddle slung on his shoulder, a wandering musician was breasting the hill, where the high Imperial road skirting the Thuringian forest bends towards that fertile valley watered by the Fulda. The sinews of Steven's steed faltered before the steepness of the ascent, and the mounted traveller, curbing his impatience to suit the way, found himself level with the humble wayfarer at a pace that made companionship inevitable. Yet, on the instant that he had recognized him, the rider would fain have passed unnoticed. It seemed hard, a perversity of fate, that in this wide, empty country, he should stumble upon the one man whom he would of all others avoid; the man who had had so much influence—he now thought for disaster—upon his life.

Geiger-Hans, the friend, the comrade, had become, in his eyes, the enemy. To his meddling he owed his present misfortune, the humiliation that was eating into his soul, the disillusion which made even the soft west wind bitter to his taste.

The wanderer started as he beheld the young face looking down at him from over the horseman's cloak.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"I!" said Steven.

The man on foot halted. He on horseback unconsciously reined in. The two remained gazing at each other, and in the eyes of both was hot reproach.

Slowly the blood crept back crimson to the countenance of Geiger-Hans, which had grown livid under its tan.

"And whither set you off alone, bridegroom, on your grey horse?" asked he at length, in that tone of irony under which he hid most of emotions.

"Anywhere," answered the bridegroom with a pale smile, "so long as I put space between myself and my bride."

Geiger-Hans drew his brows together into a dark frown. His nostrils dilated, the corners of his mouth twitched.

"Peste!" said he under his voice. Then: "Is it not a little premature? The joy bells can hardly be silent yet. Had it been a few months later—but now!"

His tone was cynical, but his eye was stern and anxious.

"Months?" echoed the rider with a laugh. "It took her but the measure of minutes to decide on my worth."

"Her?" commented the musician with inquiring emphasis.

"Did you think," answered Steven—and, though he strove to be cool, the passion of his wrath wrote itself on every line of his face and vibrated in his voice like the first mutterings of thunder—"did you think I went through the marriage ceremony for the pure amusement of making a nine days' scandal and deserting my hour-old wife? That would have been a brilliant jest indeed! No; if you must know, the situation is of her making. She took her woman's privilege ... and changed her mind."

"She was a child yesterday," said Geiger-Hans.

There was pain in Steven's smile as he returned:

"She was no child this morning."

"But, heavens!" cried the other impatiently, "even so. Did she play the woman, was it not the more reason for you to play the man? You left her, you left her ... is it possible? For a few sharp words, perhaps, some silly misunderstanding! Why, she was yours, man; and you should have carried her with you, were it on the crupper of that high-boned grey."

"Aye," replied Steven. "Even so, as you say. It also dawned upon me, deficient as I am in wits, that the time had come for me to play the man. I actually announced my intention of carrying her away with me by main force—not on this brute, but in the coach prepared for our bridal journey. She reminded me that I took her fortune with her."

"Ah, bah!" said the fiddler, and winced as if he had been struck.

"It seems she is an heiress," continued the bridegroom's voice over his head. "She offered me half her fortune—her whole fortune—if I would go without her!

Hey! what answer would you have a man make to that?"

It seemed as if the fiddler could not say; even his ready tongue had no reply.

Steven had meant to take a more dignified attitude with the vagrant; to assume as gentlemanly a mask of indifference as possible. The unexpected meeting (and Steven had no intention but that it should be the last) should be conducted with a rational regard to the distance between them. His heart was no longer on his sleeve for this wayside jackdaw to peck at. But the old power of the fellow's presence, and also his own youthful pain, were too strong for him. Into the silence he dropped a desperate cry:

"Oh, curse you, Geiger-Hans; why could you not have passed me by on the road that evening, and left me to my own life!"

The fiddler looked up at him, still mute; but there was something in his look that went straight to the core of Steven's wounded soul, and brought a sense of comfort and of strength. And yet—strange! it actually seemed as if Steven's sorrow were nothing to the sorrow of Geiger-Hans, this hour. They were enemies no more—they were comrades, struck by the same misfortune. But Geiger-Hans was brave; he knew how to bear his share. Steven felt suddenly ashamed.

"And so you rode away?" said the musician then, laying his hand on the horse's shoulder.

It was to Steven as if that lean hand had kindly touched himself.

"Aye—I got the first nag to be had for money, and rode away, leaving her my carriage and horses and servants. For a Countess Waldorff-Kielmansegg must have her equipage! That episode is closed!"

The rider chucked his reins and set the rested horse to his labour up the hill once more.

Geiger-Hans had remained a second, gazing at the stones in the road; then he roused himself, and caught up the rider in a couple of quick strides. His shoulders were rounded as beneath a burden. Yet Fate had played him too many scurvy tricks for him to indulge in the astounded rebellion of youth. After a while he looked up and spoke again.

"These women," he said, "these children—they insult a man because they do not understand. Mischief has been made—mischief is always alert somewhere when marriage-bells are ringing. Go back to her!"

"I!" cried Steven Lee.

"Go back to her!" said the fiddler again, as he trudged the stony way. "Be generous——"

Steven laughed out loud; and Geiger-Hans knew that the wound had gone deeper even than he suspected.

"I am for Vienna," said the bridegroom briefly. "But I shall make fit settlements upon her, never fear, and such provisions as may safeguard her honour ...

and my own. And as——"

"Nay, comrade," interrupted the other, sharply, "such a union as yours—why, 'twould be the easiest contract to annul that ever two young fools repented of."

Steven's hands contracted over the leather.

"Do you think so?" said he, and grew darkly crimson. "Oh, of course," he said, and laughed, "that would be much the best. Aha! Annul! Well, she has only to wish it."

The musician, observing him, showed now a lighter countenance, and presently smiled to himself. Then he shifted his instrument from his back to his breast and began to twang the strings, as if in deep reflection.

"We shall part at the top of the hill," said the rider.

"Shall we?" said the wayfarer. "I think not. Listen, my lord."

The rousing autumn wind brought indeed a strange distant rumour on its wings, and the fiddler imposed silence on his restless fingers and stood still himself, leaning his ear.

Once more Steven arrested his horse. There is nothing so infectious as the curiosity of the ear. The flapping gust fell as they halted; and then the sounds which it had carried over the crest of the knoll seemed to be repeated with much greater distinctness from the vale in their rear.

"What is it?" asked he.

It was a sound like the beat of giant storm-rain upon forest leaves, only that it was measured at repeated intervals by rhythmic jingle and clink. Even as he spoke, Steven heard a crisp drumming of hoofs separate itself from the confusion; then, upon the ring of a commanding voice, the thunder-wave of advance broke itself into silence. And in the midst of this silence a succession of cracking shots suddenly pattered close on one another, as beads dropping from a string.

"Stand back!" cried the fiddler. And, suiting the action to the word, he seized the horse by the bit and forced it backwards into the ditch that girt the road on the side of the fields.

"But what is it?" asked Steven once more, as clamour within the woods rose again: a hideous medley of human voices wrangling like angry beasts, of plunging and neighing of horses, crackling of boughs and thud of iron hoofs. The fiddler dilated his nostrils. He stood leaning against the flank of the grey, his right hand still firmly on the bit. A fine blue vapour, pungent of smell, was oozing between the dark firs.

"Have you never smelt it before, you innocent?" said he, looking up at the rider, and his sunburnt face was kindled by stern fires. "Yet there's scarce a square rood of Europe, these twelve years, that has not known the smoke of this holocaust. It is war, man!"

The words were still on his lips when the placid front of the forest before them was shaken and pierced and rent in a hundred places. Red-coated hussars, with flying blue dolmans—bareheaded most, but some with huge shako and plume at a dishevelled angle—broke covert along the whole line, crashing through the underwood, leaping, it seemed, one upon the other, each man inclining in his saddle and spurring towards the downward slope at a mad gallop.

Steven's horse shivered under him. It had, no doubt, in its youth been a charger: it was now seized with martial ardour, and flinging up its head to shake off the fiddler's grip, displayed such a strong intention to join in the race—which no doubt it conceived to be a glorious charge—that a less practised rider would have found it hard to keep the saddle.

As it was, Steven could gather but a confused impression of the flying troop as it thundered past—of a whirl, bucketing, straining, pumping, clanking, splashing; of men's faces, crimson, distorted, open-mouthed; of bridles slavered with blood and foam; of craning horses' necks, and nostrils afire!

Geiger-Hans gave a shrill laugh:

"The most gallant the Hussars of the Guard of His Majesty Jerome the First (and last!) in full rout! And, oh, shadow of Moscow! who are the pursuers?"

CHAPTER XVIII
THE RAID

"List his discourse of war, and you shall hear
A fearful battle rendered you in music."
(*King Henry V.*).

The forest was now alive with hoarse, guttural cries, as if the wooded depths had released some giant brood of ravens. And then, helter-skelter, even as the last belated hussar, blood streaming from a black gash in his forehead, clattered heavily rearmost of his comrades, reins loose, clinging to the saddle—they came! Squat riders on squat horses—cattle and man as shaggy and unkempt one as the other—with long tags of hair bobbing round wild-bearded faces, pointed fur caps drawn down to the eyes, sheepskin-clad knees up almost to the chin, stirruped with rope, brandishing rough spears; miscellaneous booty—a goose, a sucking-

pig, a frying-pan, maybe a cottage clock—swinging at the saddle-bow! They came, shouting their crow-call, exulting, squealing, grunting! They came, filled the road with clamour and clatter, and stench ... and were gone before Steven could draw, it seemed to him, the full breath of his amazement!

Like the second gust of the hurricane, they had gathered, broken past them, and were lost; the clamour of their tempest way rising loud, then growing swiftly faint in the distance, as the valley received them.

"Now," said Geiger-Hans, looking up, "here is an experience for your English-bred youth. Fate has annihilated the centuries; you have beheld the passage of the Huns! *Pouah!* what a wild-beast trail they have left behind them! To think that Napoleon should have gone to seek these wolves and jackals in their steppes, and spread the Cossack over the face of Europe!"

He sprang out of the ditch; and the grey, much injured in feeling, snorting and sullenly upheaving its haunches, was induced to follow. A roll of far-off musketry crepitated up to them from the plain.

"Do you hear?" said Geiger-Hans. "And do you know what that means?"

"They are fighting on the other side of the hill," said Steven, spurring towards the crest.

"Yes, it is perhaps worth your youthship's attention. Do not, however, flatter yourself that you are viewing a battle. A mere skirmish, *un combat*, nothing more; one of the hundred or so that takes place now, week in, week out, on the marches of the mighty conqueror's lands. For a small kingdom, little brother Jerome can flatter himself to have gathered to it, from without and within, a considerable collection of enemies—Cossacks hanging like jackals on the flanks of the great army; Prussians from the north, Saxons from the east, peasants and students from his own villages and cities. This raid is scarce like to appear in the *Gazette*, but it is enough, for the combatants! The dead yonder are as dead as though they had fallen at Austerlitz or the Moskowa. Hark, at the snap of the musket—that is the sound of the Empire cracking! 'Tis the Empire cracking," repeated the musician, running alongside, his hand at the stirrup-leather. "And the little House of Westphalia is doomed to fall, as the cottage falls on the hillside from the earthquake that has wrecked the city.... A back-wave from Moscow have we here to-day."

They had halted on the crest, and their gaze plunged into the open valley. A canopy of blue smoke hung over the fields that spread between their knoll and a little town, some half-mile distant. The mist was pierced with slow-moving lines of bayonets which flashed back the sunshine; it was traversed with colour.

Geiger-Hans ran a knowing eye over the scene:

"Aha! What did I tell you? Those are Prussians, holding the townlet," said he. "Contrast their sober uniform with Jerome's scarlets and greens, his plumes and gold lace. There go our runaways! See them draw up behind yonder crimson platoon—Brother Jerome's Grenadiers of the Guard, for he must ape big brother Napoleon.... Look, our friends the Cossacks roll back together like a swarm of hornets at the foot of the hill; they find themselves cut off from their Prussian allies—and if the Hussars but rally in time, we may see the *rôles* of the drama reversed in a minute."

He fell abruptly silent: something had flown between his head and Steven's as the latter bent towards him from his saddle—something that droned a strange song as it passed and puffed a cold breath on their cheeks.

"What was that?" asked Steven, starting.

"That was a stray Death," said the musician, placidly. "What say you—shall we seek cover?"

"Let us see the thing out!" cried Steven.

"There will be more lead loose," said Geiger-Hans, glancing up with an odd expression. "Death flies on a capricious wing when this sort of game is played."

"Why, then," answered the bridegroom, with his smile of bitterness, "that might be the simplest solution of all; at least, I should not be deeply mourned."

"If that be your mind towards bullets," said the fiddler, with a shadow of sarcasm, "for once your youth and my age are in harmony. But what if you were to tie your horse behind some forest trees? There is no need of offering him up also to our altar of despair—and he might be of use to one of us, when the day is over."

Steven admitted the suggestion without a word. Presently both men sat upon a high bank, their legs dangling into space.

"How inspiring!" said the fiddler. He unslung his instrument. "Did you hear that volley? It came from troops trained under Bonaparte, I'll wager my fiddle-bow. Here the insurgents respond. See those puffs of white smoke in and out of the line under the village wall! Not a gun together. Loose shooting ... but good hatred! I'll back it in the long run! Drums! shouts! The bayonet charge. What did I tell you? here come our Huns back again ... what's left of them. I am inspired! Hark you, this is the song of the fight.... First come the Grenadiers, cool and scornful, musket on breast, arms folded; they march like one man. '*I have served, under the Eagle; I have been of the Guard of the Great Emperor. To Moscow I have been ... and back: to-day it is sunshine: it is child's play, but I would rather be back on the ice with my Emperor. To me he is the Little Corporal: I am one of the old lot. It is I and mine who put the crown on his head. To Jena we went singing:*

"'"We'll go and bring a kingdom home,

To give little brother Jerome."

He said little brother should have a little kingdom of his own—well, what is this rabble that would undo his work? ... It was warm work at Jena, comrade—oh, and it was cold at Moscow!'...

"'*Aim at the Old Guards, kerls*' (says the Prussian to his gunners). '*Hurl down the Guard, and the field is ours! ... Hurl down the Guard, aha!*'

"'*I have to come out to fight for the Fatherland*' (says the peasant lad); '*my mother put a green sprig in my hat. I shall put a notch on my musket-stock for every Frenchman I have killed, and shall show it to my children when Gretel and I marry.*' *... Oh, but the Old Guard shoots steady! Green sprig is down on the meadow; his comrades jump over him, one steps on his hand, but he feels nothing. Poor little Patriot; he has not even struck one blow for the Fatherland, but his red blood is sinking into the soil! How bright will bloom the flower of liberty in the land thus watered!*"

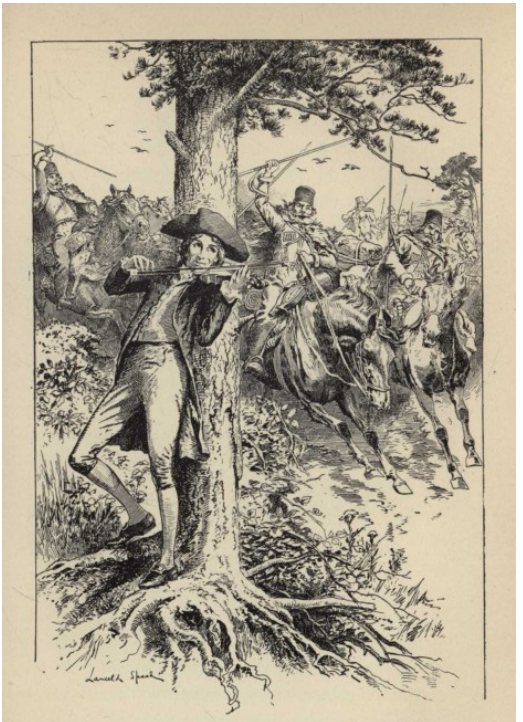
The fiddler wielded his bow with a kind of frenzy, and his battle music rose above the clamour of the distant combat, the scramble and clatter of the Cossacks up the hills, their defiant calls and grunts.

The remnant of the wild horde had reached the summit again in mad disorder, seeking the forest shelter at the first available point. A flight of bullets came singing through the air among them: the company of grenadiers, marking the routed enemy against the sky-line, had flung a last contemptuous volley after them. The savages squealed and ducked, clinging to their shaggy steeds in fantastic attitudes; a few were struck; one fell; his nearest comrade caught up the reins of his mount and, with exultant yell, led it away with him. The dead man was dragged a few yards till his inert foot fell loose of the hempen stirrup and he lay, a heap of discoloured rags, among the stones. Fear was on no man's face, but grins of defiance undaunted. Their war-cry was still of triumph.

Geiger-Hans sprang to his feet on the bank. He waved his bow, then drove it across the strings to a new song, shrill and mocking—a song of scorn for the fugitive:

"*Spread your dark wings and fly, obscene birds! Yet exult as you go: the scent of Death is in the air. In a little while you may gorge—but to-day the stricken Eagle can still beat back the carrion crows. Fly, flap your wings—caw—caw!*"

Steven stared amazed at his companion, and listened spellbound. The musician was like a man possessed. His grizzled locks seemed to stand out from his face, his left hand danced along the strings, his right arm worked with fury. If ever catgut and wood mocked and insulted, that possessed instrument of Geiger-Hans' did so that day of the combat of Heiligenstadt, in the teeth of the defeated Kalmuck. "*Caw, caw!*" it shrieked, catching the very guttural of the last belated



"Spread your dark wings, obscene birds! . . . the scent of Death is in the air. In a little while you may gorge! . . . Fly, flap your wings—caw—caw!"

"Spread your dark wings, obscene birds! ... the scent of Death is in the air. In a little while you may gorge! ... Fly, flap your wings—caw—caw!"

Cossack, who struggled in rear of his comrades on a wounded horse. The man turned back in his sheepskin saddle, fury in his bloodshot eyes, poised his weapon over his head, measuring his distance.

"Take care!" cried Steven, leaping from the bank. But louder and shriller played Geiger-Hans. The savage hurled the lance; and Steven, flinging himself forward, with arms extended, caught the blow. He rolled back upon the player and both came to the ground together. The music fell mute. Shouting victory, the Cossack forced his bleeding nag into the brushwood.

* * * * *

"If Madame Sidonia were here," said the fiddler, with emphasis on the married title, "what a hero you would be to her!"

He had bound Steven's shoulder—the wound was an ugly gash enough—ministered to him with the wine of the country from a flask of his own, and water from the brook. The contest for the village, between King Jerome's troops and the raiders, was yet undecided, and fitful sounds of battle were still growling in the valley.

The winds blustered in the tree-tops; they had swept the sky from west to east more blue than there is colour to describe. There was a wonderful pulse of growing things about them. Every grass-blade shook in lusty individual life. The leafage was full of bright-eyed, feathered broods, planning the autumn flitting. The whole forest hummed with the minute creatures of Nature's fecundity.... In the plain, openly and with tumult, the masters of earth were strewing its fair face with Death.

"If Madame Sidonia were here!" repeated the fiddler, and cast a sly look at the young man's face over the last knot of his bandage.

Steven frowned and was silent.

"They will go on tearing each other to pieces down there till night. What say you? Shall not grey steed retrace his steps and carry Master Bridegroom back where he should be?"

"No!" cried the other, scarlet leaping to his livid face. "A thousand times no! I am not yet the base thing she deems me."

The musician subdued a sigh.

"What a noble thing is true pride!" quoth he, picked up his fiddle and began to examine it carefully.—"Heavens!" he cried, "if you had broken it! Can a man fling himself upon another in such inconsiderate fashion when there's a Stradivarius between them!"

"Had it not been for my want of consideration," said Steven, with some pique, "I think the precious instrument would hardly have known the touch of

your fingers again."

The fiddler laughed out loud, as if the boyish outcry had pleased him; then, as suddenly, grew grave.

"My friend," said he, "the steel has not been tempered, I fear, the lead has not been cast, that will reach this heart.... Ah, Lord!"

It was an exclamation of uttermost weariness. He picked at his strings and tightened them with absent fingers. Then he flashed a smile at his companion:

"You are amazed, are you not, at my ingratitude? What! Here have I, Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg, preserved the existence of this wretched tramp at the risk of my noble, valuable one—here have I shed my blue blood to save his muddy fluid, and the creature has not even a 'Thank you'! ... Comrade," went on the musician, and his eye dilated, his countenance assumed a lofty mien, "I would not shame myself and you by such a word as 'Thanks'! The creature that would not give himself to save his fellow-creature when he can is not worth the name of man."

Steven, abashed that he had indeed thought himself heroic, blushed again and, looking down, began idly plucking with his unhurt right hand the wood-violets that grew in patches on the bank. The fiddler followed his movements, then his eye suddenly grew fixed, his jaw dropped. Slowly the healthy colour ebbed from his cheek and left it ashen. Steven, looking at him, was astonished and alarmed.

"For heaven's sake!" he cried, "are you ill?"

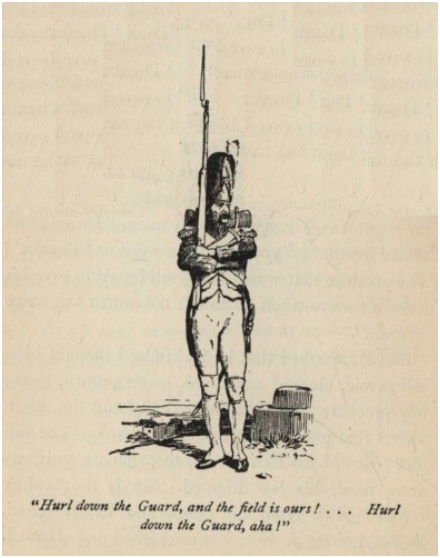
The fiddler stretched out his hand and culled the posy from the other's grasp. The touch of his fingers was as cold as death.

"Violets!" said he, in a sort of whisper. "There is blood on them!" He shuddered from head to foot.

"Perhaps all the mystery is but that he is a poor mad gentleman," thought Steven, It was an idea which could not fail to recur to him in the company of this fantastic being; but never had it seemed so justified.

CHAPTER XIX
THE MELODY IN THE VIOLETS

"What of the heart without her? Nay, poor heart,
Of thee what word remains ere speech be still?



"Hurl down the Guard, and the field is ours! ... Hurl down the Guard, aha!"

A wayfarer by barren ways and chill
Steep ways and weary, without her thou art...."
ROSSETTI.

Geiger-Hans laid the flowers on his knee and, still staring at them with the eyes of mingled horror and grief, gathered his instrument to his embrace and drew from it a strain the like of which Steven had never heard. Low and simple it was, with even a delicate lilt, as of the shadow-dance of bygone joys, yet so heart-rending that, after a moment or two, the listener felt tears rising to his eyes and a catch at his throat, and cried on his companion to stop.

The musician laid down his fiddle and turned his drawn countenance upon his companion.

"That is the melody in the violets, the melody that is never silent in my soul, night or day. You cannot hear it? Why, then, you must listen to the story.—I was once as youthful as you and had also a very noble pride—I had nearly as much reason," said Geiger-Hans, his pale lips writhing in a smile of scorn; "but, as men

differ, their same passions vary in motive. It was of little moment to me that I came of an ancient house. (Ah! it pleases you to know so much! You have always guessed it, else had you not frequented me. Let it pass, friend, lest I should blush for you.) No, my pride was the pride of intellect. I knew a vast amount! I learned to lisp English that I might study Bacon and Locke, and to chew German that I might wrangle over Kant. I was the friend of Helvetius and Diderot, the rival of Holbach. We worshipped Voltaire. Reason was our God! In short, I was one of those they called the Encyclopædists; we dreamed of doing away with old Abuses and replacing all established things by brand-new Perfections. 'Humanity and Freedom!' was our war-cry. With sweet-oil and rose-water our revolution was to be accomplished. You know what we did for France and the world? We set the first stone rolling, a half-century ago, and"—with a tragic gesture he pointed to the valley—"you can hear the echo of it still reverberating down yonder! Freedom we preached: and the whole world is enslaved as never it was before! Reason was our lodestar: and the State was handed over to the lowest intellects to guide it according to their brute passions! Humanity was our watchword: and France was drenched in blood from end to end, and her sons have brought blood and fire to every land in Europe! The blood of that wretched son of the steppes blackening yonder on the road, the blood shed in yonder bullet-riddled village by that very volley that shakes us as we sit, is all offered to the honour of that same trinity of our invention: Freedom, Humanity ... and Reason! Oh, glorious was the path we opened! Had we not just cause for pride?"

He fell silent a second; and Steven dared not speak, so corrosive was the bitterness of his every word, so poignant the emotion written on every furrow of his countenance.

"Oh, it was a golden time!" he resumed. "We philosophized up to the steps of Versailles. Louis made beautiful locks; Marie Antoinette tended snowy sheep; the roses bloomed at Trianon ... and not the wisest of us ever saw the precipice yawn! As for me—even the greatest minds are subject to the everyday passions of humanity—" his lips parted upon an ironic smile—"I fell in love, neither more nor less than the most elementary youngster of the land. She——" He hesitated; then, steadying his voice, proceeded in tones which betrayed the effort of speech: "she was of an old-fashioned Breton stock, and her ideas and mine were as the poles asunder. But upon one common ground, and a fair pasture it was to me, we met and were equal: we loved."

He paused, his breath came quick. "Heaven!" he said, and it seemed as if he knew not that he spoke, "how I loved her!"

He picked up a violet from the heap on his knees, and passed his fingers over it caressingly; his countenance softened. When he began again, it was in gentler accents than Steven had ever heard him use:

”When two people love each other, young man, and when each believes the other to be mistaken in some cardinal point of judgment, the dearest thought they cherish is to bring the Beloved to the truth. I had no doubt but that I could open her mind; she, but that she would redeem my perverted soul. I have told you what a fine pride I had. So noble it was that I was proud of my pride. And being an apostle of Liberty, the idea that a woman should resist her husband, that the weaker vessel should not give way to the stronger, never dawned on my emancipated mind! Well, well—we quarrelled! The fault was mine. Could I not have been content to worship her in her sweet faith! She had a high spirit. I wounded her in a thousand ways. Women have susceptibilities that we, thick-hided, thick-witted, dream not of. Even when we touch them to caress, we bruise. And then, when their pain is intolerable and they turn and strike at us, our wound is that of the most innocent, the most injured! Oh, when my measure was full against her, she insulted me, if you like—much as your little bride this morning insulted your Highmindedness. She said words that my exquisite pride could not endure. Of course, you will well understand (being even such a self-respecting youth as I was then) that I had no choice but to leave her. That was right, was it not?”

Steven, under that terrible gaze, ironic even in its haunting agony, was at a loss how to reply. He muttered something of a woman’s duty and wifely submission. The fiddler caught up the words fiercely.

”Ay,” cried he. ”A woman’s duty—wifely submission. Oh, strange how men prate of chivalry, in the exercise of their bodily strength, because of a woman’s weakness, and yet never see that, because also of a woman’s sensitiveness of soul, a man should take shame to parade the superior strength of his will—that he should spare the delicate spirit as well as the delicate frame. Listen:—my strength of mind was such that it left me no choice but to desert the woman whom I had vowed to protect, to make parade of my manhood by leaving her to live her own life alone, to cast the frail and lovely thing I had held in my arms away from my love and guardianship. No doubt, no doubt, I made some very generous dispositions as regards my fortune—even as you now propose towards Madame Sidonia, and she had her people to go to, even as your wife has: those whom she had given up to come to me. But when the day dawned that I had to look into my heart and read the truth, what did I see? Look into your heart now, and learn the baseness of your own motives. Why do you leave your bride? Why did I leave mine? For what reason, but that she might weep and mourn for me; that she might learn how precious was the jewel she had not appreciated! ... To be revenged ... revenged on the Beloved!”

He flung himself back against the bole of the fir that rose behind him and closed his eyes.

"I left her," he went on, "left France, left Europe. I went to America, the new home of Freedom, the only country on the face of the earth where the goddess was worshipped as she should be. I had vowed not to return till recalled: I was summoned by a voice terribly different from hers. It took three months before the noise of the storm reached me on that far-off shore, and I knew that it must take me at least a month more ere I could reach her. And she was in danger! ... I think it was then I began to go mad—for it is understood that I am mad, is it not?"

He opened his bright eyes and fixed them on Steven, who became so extremely embarrassed that the fiddler broke into unmirthful laughter.

"Mad!" he repeated. His gaze flickered; and, if truth be told, he looked none too sane. Then he sank his head between his hands with a groan. "If only I were a little madder!" he cried. "The story is nearly finished," he went on presently, in a new, toneless voice. "When I landed in France, all the powers of the Hell my superior intellect denied were let loose in the land—Danton, Marat and Robespierre represented the trilogy of Liberty, Reason and Humanity! The prisons were full, the guillotine everywhere restless.... Our Golden Age! ... A fortnight I looked for her. Have you ever sought in vain one you had loved, even for an hour? Dante never devised a more exquisite torture for his deepest circle. My house in Paris had been confiscated for the nation's soldiers; her father's castle in Lorraine had been burnt to the ground. At my old home at Nancy at last I found a trace. She had refused, it seemed, to join in the flight of her people across the Rhine; but, when trouble became threatening, had taken up her post on my estate. That was like her. She had been arrested—so dangerous an enemy of the people! She was in the infamous prison at Nancy. She——" He flung his battered old hat from his head, dashed back his hair, loosened the wide collar at his throat. Breath seemed to fail him. A dark wave of blood rushed to his forehead. "All, all had abandoned her, save one poor girl—a peasant from our farm, whose people were of the local patriots.... This girl was allowed access to the cells. I met her at the prison gates, whither my frenzied search brought me at length. She knew me, though I was a tramp already. At sight of my face, she clapped her hands and broke into wild sobs. I was too late! That morning.... Why do you look at me like that? Do you wonder that I am still alive? That is where the God I denied has His vengeance of me, you see. I cannot die. Oh, I could kill myself, of course! But, mark how deep has the Encyclopædist fallen.... I dare not, *dare not, lest I lose my chance of meeting her again!* ... Ah! there is great pity in your eyes.... Her little delicate head—she held it like a queen's. Under the powder, her hair was gold. (I have not even one lock of her hair.) I used to clasp her slender throat between both my hands.... The peasant girl had kept by her to the end. She had stood at the foot of the scaffold, that a last friendly glance might speed that lovely soul. 'She smiled

to me,' said the poor creature, sobbing. My eyes were dry.... Then she drew from her bosom a bunch of violets, and said, '*Madame, les avail à son corsage.*'..."

Geiger-Hans gathered up the flowers scattered on his knees, and crushed them against his face.

"She always loved violets," he murmured. "These have no scent," he went on dreamily; "but hers, hers—oh, they were sweet!"

"*She always loved violets. These have no scent, . . . but hers,—oh, they were sweet!*"

"She always loved violets. These have no scent, ... but hers,—oh, they were sweet!"

"Ah! friend!" cried Steven, and had no further word. Infinite pity indeed was in the look he turned upon the musician. It seemed as if the latter wandered as he spoke again.

"There was blood on the violets," said he, dropping his hands, "her blood and mine—for the man that was I died too, then, murdered in his youth, even as she." His face had grown ashen again, his eyes were restless in their orbits. "The something that lived on, the miserable carcass, the old man—call it myself, if you will—this self that is before you now—it took the violets and began to walk away.... And it has walked ever since!" He gave a laugh, and the sound of it was mad. "No place could be home to me again—no land could be country, France least of all. But the skies and the trees are kind; they understand my sorrow, they take it into themselves. And sometimes they give me back peace. And then there's the music.... I was always a musician. One, a village priest, found out by accident that the crazy tramp he had sheltered played better on his old Strad than he did himself. The fiddle was to him as his child, but he gave it to me, for he had compassion on me.... And so was born Geiger-Hans. And Fiddler Hans and his fiddle will walk until one day he can walk no more. And then he will lie down on the kind, brown earth, and turn his face to the skies ... perhaps!"

He thrust the flowers into his breast. Then he leaned forward, his elbow on his knees, sheltering his eyes in his hands: and there was silence. The valley below had sunk into stillness.

While Steven had listened to the story of one man's defeat in life, a combat where the fate of hundreds had been decided had been fought and won. And now they were picking up the dead yonder, in the evening calm of the plain. The wind had fallen with the fall of the day, and only the topmost branches of the pines swayed and whispered in scarcely perceptible airs. The light was growing golden mellow, the shadows were lengthening. Steven remembered his wound.

The fiddler turned and spoke. It was with composure.

"Well," said he, "which way shall it be; back or forward?"

"I do not know," said Steven, in a low voice, and dropped his eyelids as if ashamed.

The fiddler stretched out his hand and helped the other to rise, with a vigorous grasp. As they stood side by side, he suddenly cast his arm round the young man's shoulders.

"The child," said he, "Sidonia! ... Oh, I want her to be happy. The first day I ever saw her, I thought that if we had had a child, the woman I loved and I, it would have been like her. And, to my madness, she has gradually become even as my own. I have haunted her ways. However imperiously the roaming fit may come upon me, there is always something that draws me back to watch, to guard, to care. I gave her to you. Aye, Count Steven, it was I gave her to you. And if again I have failed with the happiness of what is dearest to me on earth ... then indeed it is that I am cursed!" His voice failed, broken; his eyes implored. After a while he went on: "When her soul looks out of her clear eyes, when she moves

her head with its golden burden ... she has a trick of speech, a laugh ... Oh, it is like a refrain of old music to me, a sighing strain from a lost life! Her little, slender throat—I could hold it in both my hands.... Go back to her.... If I knew her happy, my restless spirit would, I believe, find some kind of peace. Ah! you think it will be hard? I tell you it will not. You do not know a woman's heart. Forget that your pride is hurt. Remember that you are young. Oh, if you but knew! Life has one unsurpassable flower for youth—take it now, lest a breath from heaven scatter its bloom. Its scent is for you! The love of your youth, go, gather it! Go back to little Sidonia!"

"I will go back," said Steven, and his lips trembled.

Silently Geiger-Hans loosened the grey horse, helped the wounded man to mount, and led the way down the hill.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRUE READING OF A LETTER

"Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the e'er-fraught heart, and bids it break."
(*Macbeth*).

Steven, in his turn, had a tale to tell; and, as they retraced their way back towards the Burg through the gathering shadows, he narrated to the fiddler, with great simplicity, the episode with the Burgravine which had led him, first into the *oubliette*, and ultimately to the quarrel with Sidonia.

Geiger-Hans made small comment. The facts he knew already, the motives he had shrewdly surmised. Sometimes he smiled, unseen in the thick, moist gloom; the bright day had turned to a moody night, heavy clouded. The young man's ingenuousness pleased him; also the manliness that refrained from any self-righteous assertion of innocence. But sometimes he sighed; it was a tangled story!

When they reached Wellenshausen village, it was evident that there could be no question of making the ascent to the Burg till the next morning. Rain had begun to fall. Geiger-Hans might have faced the break-neck road—doubly hazardous in the wet and the dark—but he flatly refused to aid the wounded

man in any such mad undertaking, and Steven's impatience had to submit to the inevitable.

Steven had thought to have measured ere this all the possibilities of the Silver Stork in the matter of discomfort. But in a house now thoroughly disorganized by the incursions of a stray detachment of Jerome's cavalry, the claims, even of a fastidious traveller, not to speak of an itinerant musician, were the least of concerns to-night.

In the dismal, rat-haunted attic which he shared with the bridegroom, Geiger-Hans heard his comrade groan and toss through the long hours of his wedding-night. If sleep fell upon the young man at all, it was broken by nightmare. And the fiddler, lying flat on his back with his hands under his head, resignedly facing the insomnia which his restless spirit knew but too familiarly, could foretell almost to a breath the span of troubled unconsciousness, the start, the half-groan of awakening. And he was as glad, almost, as Steven himself when the white face of dawn began stealthily to peer through the dormer window.

* * * * *

Geiger-Hans glanced two or three times sharply at the youth's face as once again he found himself trudging beside him. Steven had submitted almost sullenly to all the musician's arrangements; in silence had mounted the mule prepared for him; in silence had they started on their upward way. The vagrant breasted the rugged path with his usual activity; but his countenance was dark with concern. He did not like the glassy stare of Steven's eyes, the alternate pallor and flush on his cheek, the blackened, cracked look of the lips.

"Madame Sidonia will have some nursing to do, I think," he said once.

Steven gave a wan smile, quite a long time after the words had been spoken. He was beginning to lose his original frenzy of intention in this early morning start; to think only of the rapture of lying between cool sheets in some dark place, with Sidonia's flower touch upon his throbbing temples.

After the wet night had broken a gay morning—the rain-beaten earth was fragrant; fragrant every tiny sprig of herb and spicy rock-clinging bush. As they ascended, the pleasant wood-smoke from the village hearths gradually gave place to the more subtle pungencies of the heights. All this, however, was wasted upon Steven. And wasted, too, the gaunt picturesqueness of their first view of the castle, with the golden early sunshine upon the grimness of its walls, caressing the ruin, gleaming back from the defiant granite of the keep.

The dogs bayed, a flock of rooks rose, beating the air at their approach; a brown donkey, heavily saddled, hitched by the bridle to a bar of the open gate, flapped his ears and turned his patient countenance, mildly surprised, upon them.

The door to the hall, barred and nail-studded, so inhospitable as a rule, stood open. It was a vastly different scene from that of the evening of their first visit—when they stood, a pair of adventurers wrapped in mist, before the castle, seeking admittance to walls apparently as impenetrable as any in fairy-lore. Steven was here, now, by his right, to claim his own, and all lay in the sunshine, strangely peaceful, the open door seeming to forestall a welcome. But the fiddler was seized with boding. There are grim visages upon which the sight of a smile strikes misgivings: such was now the face of the Burg.

The voice of a woman singing lustily within some distant chamber smote his ear, as he lifted a hand for the bell chain; and he shook his head. Even before Martin, the doorman, put in an appearance, shuffling out of the kind of kennel where he lurked upon that watch which had been his for thirty years, Geiger-Hans knew what had occurred. Martin, with red waistcoat unbuttoned, a china pipe hanging from his jeering lip, slippers on his feet, and the froth of bridal beer running down his chin, stared in amazement at the sight of the travellers; then welcomed them with the heartiness of the slightly elevated.

"The noble family have all departed," he cried quickly; and presently chuckled, leering at the bridegroom who sat stiffly on the mule, as if he neither heard nor saw.

Some one came trotting into the hall, softly on list soles, in a great bustle. It was the Forest-Mother. Her pleasant face wore an unwonted air of seriousness, and her lips were pursed as upon solemn thought. But never had she been to Geiger-Hans a more comfortable spectacle.

At sight of him her hands were flung up in wonder; and, at further glimpse of the rider without, they hovered in mid-air, as if paralyzed.

"Alas, Onkel—too late! All away, yesterday—and the child's heart bursting. Aye, it is all mighty queer and sad. I little thought I should be making for home again this morning, with everything so criss-cross and wrong and strange!"

Geiger-Hans made a sudden stride out of the hall back to the side of the mule.

"Down with you, comrade," he said, with that note of gentleness in his voice which, so far, only Sidonia had known. Steven, after a pause for comprehension, turned towards the speaker with his feeble smile, and suddenly swayed.

"Nay, mother," the fiddler called out as he caught the lad in his arms, "you mistake; there will be no going home for you for some time to come."

* * * * *

"Ach! the poor young gentleman," sighed the Forest-Mother, when she had heard the tale. And that was not until Steven's fever-dream had been realized, and he

lay between cool sheets in a dark room; though, indeed, for Sidonia's flower touch he had to put up with Mrs. Forester's large plump hand. Not that it made much difference either just then, for he was somewhat rambling in his mind. "Ach, the poor young gentleman, it is a real talent he has for coming in the way of blows!"

"He has a talent for mending, too, remember," said the fiddler, shortly. His dry tone concealed a real anxiety. Young things, as he knew, took blows of body and soul hard. A poisoned wound is bad enough in itself, without a sore heart and a mind ill at rest.... He could not leave the lad—that was clear. "Where have they taken the child?" he asked.

"Sidonia? Ach—she kept her lips close as wax and never told me a word—not even me, the old mother! But that French minx of the Lady Burgravine did nought but chatter of Cassel."

The word fell like a stone on Geiger-Hans' heart. It was almost with impatience that he glanced at the long, helpless figure in the bed. The young man ought to be up and doing! ... Cassel, seething pot of intrigue and low manoeuvre, paradise of spendthrifts, adventurers, scoundrels, it was the last place on earth for the guileless fugitive bride—and Betty the born schemer. But, if life had taught this wanderer anything, it was submission to the inevitable.

For the moment nothing could be done but to nurse the sick man. Some vague thought of sending a message to Sidonia, to tell her of her bridegroom's pass, flashed into his mind, only to be dismissed. The chances of any communication reaching her were remote. He could not go himself. And, could he have done so, some inner conviction told him that here he had best not interfere. Between the tree and the bark let none put his finger. The lovers must win back to each other without any further meddling. He was not certain that the separation, the very anger, misunderstanding and soreness, might not be working for the best. They all had gone too fast, they had made too sure. Steven had been an over-confident wooer: little Sidonia too ready to be won.

Geiger-Hans and the Forest-Mother made a tolerable existence for themselves within those sullen walls that had certainly never before beheld such free humours as the wanderer's, such cosiness and comfort as the Frau Ober-Forsterin's. Truth to say, from the instant the sick man was put into her care, the old dame became possessed of excellent spirits. Every one has a special ideal of happiness. Nursing chanced to be hers: nursing of men, be it understood, preferably young men—no harm if they were good-looking—and wounds her speciality. She had salves that would, she was proud to say, make the bark grow on a lopped tree. As for poisoned hurts, had she not, she alone, brought her Friedel round after he had been gored and trampled upon by the stag? And as for febrifuges and herb-teas,

if she had been willing to sell her secrets, she had not a doubt about it, she now might be a rich woman.

On the fifth morning, a tan-faced boy, with wild eyes looking from side to side, like a bird's, came pattering up into the Burg, having defied the crags with hardened bare feet. He brought a letter which had reached the Forest-House the night before, addressed to its mistress.

The Forest-Mother took it from the fiddler's hand, with many winks and pointings towards the great bed whereon her charge lay asleep. She betook herself to the window and began to peruse, with some labour, forming each word with her lips as she went on.

The fiddler had recognized Sidonia's characteristic hand, upright and painstaking. Presently the good woman, shaking her head, folded the sheet and, coming over to the fiddler with her noiseless yet ponderous tread, placed the missive back into his hand.

The fiddler read:

"BELOVED LITTLE FOREST-MOTHER,

"I promised to write. I am very well, but I wish I were back with you in the dear green forest. Greet good Friedel for me. Tell him not to forget to give the white doe a piece of rye bread from me every day. And it would be kind of him to take old Belthazar out with him now and again, if only for a short round. I know he is old and stiff; but the dear old fellow breaks his heart to be left behind when all the young dogs are taken out. And, dear Forest-Mother, when you go by the kennels, will you give him a pat for me? And you might just tell him that he is worth all the silly young things put together, and that the kennels had never such a fine dog as he. I am sure he understands, and it will hearten him up. And, when you see Geiger-Onkel, tell him I think of him, and that his airs keep playing in my head. But always the sad ones. And tell him, too, that I never was a fairy princess, but only a silly country girl. This is a place all streets and houses, and it is very noisy. Everybody seems running about, but I do not know what they do. I don't like it, but it is better for me to be here than at the Burg. Of course we are at the Palace. Aunt Betty did not like Uncle Ludo's apartment on the ground floor, so we have a great suite of rooms to ourselves in a wing. It is all gold and silk, and very grand. But, oh, I would rather have the old Forest-House kitchen, with the rafters and the little windows, and all the wood presses smelling so good of bees-wax!

"Aunt Betty says it is very dull at Cassel just now, because the king is still away. Next week, she says, it will be very different when he returns. But it seems

to me that she is always out at parties. I have no dresses yet. I am very glad to be left at home. So I am quiet here, but oh, it is not the quiet of the forest. Thou Forest-Mother, I wish I could kiss thee.

"SIDONIA.

"I hope the old jackdaw is well."

"Na," said the old lady, who had watched him reading, her arms folded over her deep bosom, "what manner of letter is this at all for a bride who has run away from her man? That is verily but a foolish child. She was too young to be wed, eh, Geiger-Onkel?"

"That is the letter of a suffering woman," quoth Geiger-Hans, softly, "and the whole letter, Mother Friedel, is one cry towards him."

"Jeminy, and where do you see that?" whispered the dame with a shrug for the poor loony. "Well," she added, in her cheerful undertone, "we've had a splendid night, our skin is as cool as a little frog's, and we are healing as quick as a sapling. I wouldn't say but that in another couple of weeks we might be quite able to travel."

Geiger-Hans looked at the bed, at the fine sleeping face, placidly and wholesomely pale, at the charming languid hand flung in abandonment on the purple coverlet.

"Mother Friedel," he said, and his voice was none the less decided because so low pitched, "three days must see us on the road again."

Heedless of her scandalized protest he folded the letter and, thrusting it into his breast, gave himself up to reflection. A smile, half-bitter, half-tender, hovered upon his lips. The child ... she had remembered him—after her old hound.

CHAPTER XXI
AT THE MOCK VERSAILLES

"You are just a porcelain trifle, Belle Marquise!
Just a thing of puffs and patches,
Made for madrigals and catches,

Not for heart-wounds, but for scratches..."
AUSTIN DOBSON.

Viennese Betty was in Cassel; and if ever the right person was in the right place, it was Betty in Cassel, the Frenchified Cassel at least of King Jerome. She breathed in its irresponsible, exciting, immoral atmosphere with rapture. Its tinfoil splendour was utterly satisfying to her eyes; its jests provoked her charmed laughter; its aims measured her utmost ambitions. To shine among these doubtful stars; to take the lead in frivolities, without fear of losing caste—nay, with every prospect of being lifted upon giddy triumph as the newest and most influential "*pompadourette*"—even in her dreams Betty had never devised for herself a more enchanting prospect! To make the thing complete, her Bluebeard was tame, absolutely at her mercy ... and held relentlessly at a distance.

At the first sight of a scowl, at the first rumple of that brow that used to strike terror, at the first threat of breaking through her imposed barriers, Betty had but to prattle airily of "*oubliettes*" (strangely inappropriate term for dark doings that never could be forgotten), or yet to fall into alarming *pamoisons*, into fits of shuddering, artistically simulated, accompanied by apparently wandering yet exceedingly suggestive speech—and the Burgrave was forthwith reduced to a jelly.

The Burgrave was indeed an altered being, went moodily, found his cup bitter and his food savourless, while the Burgravine, tasting all the delights of freedom, fluttered through her first week in Cassel like a butterfly through a flower garden under full sunshine. A butterfly she was, upon one side of her nature; but, upon another, capable of determination and deep-seated resentments. True, she had other and, to her mind, better quarry to pursue now than Beau Cousin Kielmansegg—a mere rich young nobleman; yet it added not a little to the fulness of her gratification to know that she had successfully parted him from Sidonia.

The evening after her visit to Napoleonshöhe found her in the most delicate of rose-powdered wrappers, seated at her writing-table in the window of her boudoir, so prodigiously content with herself and existence that little snatches of song, little trills of laughter, escaped her, as she pondered over her correspondence.

It was towards the hour of seven, and the gardens beneath her windows (so satisfying to Betty's taste) with their mock Versailles elaboration, were bathed in mellow light. The statues took golden hues and flung a long fantastic shadow. The fountains flashed and tinkled. Some one was practising French airs on the clarinet in a room below. A gust of mingled flower-scents rose up to her nostrils: the pungency of clove pink, the coarser incense of white lilies, and the nearer

breath of the climbing rose-tree that aspired towards her window.

Betty was the last person in the world to be consciously grateful for any offering of nature; she was merely aware of a general flattering of the senses which added to her content.

A few days ago, at Napoleonshöhe, she had met Jerome of Westphalia for the first time. And what a truly charming man! Not a hint of the plebeian Corsican about him. No—they maligned who said so. What manners, what courtesy and dash combined! What a delightful smile! What an eye! It was rumoured that strong men shivered under the glance of his great imperial brother. If you had asked her, Betty would have told you that, from all accounts, Napoleon seemed to her a distinctly overrated individual—a boor, who would chuck a lady under the chin or take her by the ear, as though she were a grenadier. Bah!—Nay, give her the agreeable thrill of coming beneath Jerome's meaning gaze. A delicious recurrence of the sensation crept through her frame as, with closed eyes, she recalled the moment ... Jerome's first sight of her, his start, his stare, his flickering smile.

On the table lay the very rose he had presented to her with such a curve of slender olive fingers; with so happy a phrase, so graceful an inclination. Betty had handled the flower a good deal since, had sniffed and caressed it a vast number of times; the pretty leaves were blighted, but never did flower excite such admiration in the Burgravine's regard.

She had met the King but a day or two ago; they had exchanged but a glance, a word, a courtesy—and behold! Betty's morning courier had brought her a letter from the monarch. A love letter, if you please, neither more nor less. A request, a demand, for a rendezvous. *Peste!* he lost no time, the little King! But were there not royal privileges? Had he not the same blood as the Conqueror in his veins? Moreover, was not this very haste the best compliment that could be paid a woman? Not, indeed, that Betty had any notion of allowing herself to go too cheaply. Perhaps, indeed, she had no very clear idea of letting herself go at all; but to dally with an exciting situation, to tantalize, to reign, to fire, and then dash cold water.... Stay, such coarse expressions ill applied to the Burgravine's delicate methods: to spray, very gently, with cold rose-water; not sufficiently to drown the lover's ardour, but just enough to produce a little fizz and splutter—to reign, in fact, chief of the many sultanas by reason, perhaps, of her very refusal to qualify for the post! And only to yield at last when ... But here Betty was glad to allow the prospect to be veiled in a kind of luminous mist. The immediate programme was quite sufficiently absorbing.

No wonder she nibbled the feathers of her pen. Her answer to the kingly missive must be a work of art. The "*rendezvous*" itself must not be denied, whatever else it might deny. Betty had the instinct of her species, the born coquette.

Too much virtue, at the beginning, is fatal. Many twigs are required for the lighting of a proper fire.

It stood complete at last, a most dainty little note, indited on pink paper, duly folded and enclosed in a French envelope, wafered with mauve—Betty was of the last mode, these days, even to her writing paper.

The congenial task concluded, she had another to perform. The courier from Heiligenstadt, whither the King had repaired on a tour of military inspection, had brought her a second letter—also a love cry, or it might better be described as a love-bellow. The Burgrave, away on duty with his sovereign, appealed from a distance to his obdurate wife.

He was filled with amorous longing, jealousy, despair. How long was he to be exiled from her favour? The situation was past endurance! He implored, groaned, rebelled, threatened, and was abject again—all in a few frenzied lines. The gist of the whole was in the last phrase: "When am I to be forgiven? Am I not your husband?"

The answer to this effusion required but a flourish of the pen. Yet, as the lady planted a green wafer upon the second envelope, there was a triumphant smile upon her lip, a vindictive gleam of pleasure in her eye. The despatching of her morning budget had been altogether pleasurable.

* * * * *

Close by, in the little chamber allotted to her, Sidonia, behind locked doors, was engaged upon a similar task; for to her the courier had also brought a letter demanding instant acknowledgment. It was a very short one, and by no means so loverlike as either of Betty's billets.

"I have been slightly indisposed" (wrote Steven) "and unable to travel for a few days; but I trust to be in Cassel within the week, and shall seek you in the Palace. It must be clear to you that you owe me at least an explanation. It is impossible that we can part for ever thus.

"STEVEN."

Not a word of love! Not a hint of despair! Not even reproach! It was all cold, cruel business. As Sidonia wrote her reply, the tears dripped so quickly that she could scarce see the paper.

Eliza, very brisk and tripping, who had the charge of posting the three

letters, studied the superscriptions very carefully before committing them to the royal mail. Her eyes grew round at sight of the pink-wafered note. *Diable!* If the mistress had such correspondence, it might become a question whether Jäger Kurtz would continue to be good enough for the maid. She smiled vindictively at sight of the green wafer. If she knew her lady, the Chancellor was far from being fully paid out yet. "And serve him right," said she, who would herself be long before she forgave Burg-Wellenshausen for the horrors of its tedium.

The old-fashioned sheet that bore Sidonia's childish scrawl she weighed awhile reflectively in her hand. Madame la Burgravine would doubtless give something to see the contents of *that* letter.... Then, with a shrug of her shoulders, she sent it on its voyage with the rest. The service of her lady had its advantages; and Eliza, pining in the Burg, had stuck to it with unerring prescience of better days. But it did not follow that she held no opinions of her own. And she had even a kind of good-nature that did quite as well as a conscience, as far as her neighbours were concerned, and was far more agreeable for herself.

"I am not hard-hearted like madame, look you," said the maid to herself. "The child is a nice child, as young ladies go, and she should have her chance."

* * * * *

The spirits of spring and autumn are akin, although the one journeys towards the fulness of life, and the other to the cold sleep, death. Across the dividing months they seem to meet each other, to serve you smiles and tears, skies of a tenderness unknown to summer, gales of wind, soft as milk, mighty as love. These come chanting with the voices of the ocean, the mountain and the forest, great songs of glory; seize you by the way in resistless arms, tell you wondrous things, and set your blood leaping as they pass. They set, if autumn it be, the yellow leaves awhirl in a death dance; or, if spring, every baby bud rocking on its sappy spray.

The travellers, one riding, the other afoot, went side by side along the road towards Cassel. It was a south-west wind that buffeted them. Even in the heart of the inland it seemed to sing of distant seas; to bear on its pinions airs at once untamable and mild, balmy and salt. The forest trees roared under it as with the voice of waters. It gathered from them drifts of yellowing leaves, even as, leagues behind, it had churned spray from Mediterranean waves. In the young traveller's heart storm answered to storm; its breath in his nostrils maddened him, for he had fever in his veins, and he was balked in love.

But to the other traveller, whose hair was grey, who tramped along with the even measure of him who has learned to ignore fatigue, the autumn lament was charged with the hopelessness of the grave. It told him how all that is born must die, and how the beautiful die first. In the choiring of the forest he heard

the dirge of waning life. In each gust of pungent fragrance he could smell the bitter graves of yesteryear.

The horseman was clothed in fine and fashionable garments. He who trudged was but a vagrant player, who made music for his daily bread and rarely knew in the morning where he would lay his head at night.

They went in silence. Steven's heart was heavy. Robbed of his bride well-nigh on the altar-steps, he was now seeking her, in an impatience which repeated disappointment had fed to frenzy. And Geiger-Hans was his guide.

At a certain spot the forest began to press closer upon the imperial road. The overarching boughs flung a swaying, premature night upon them; and, as the woodland enfolded them, it seemed to draw them into a great sanctuary. Let the gale rage without, here was protection and an inner stillness all the deeper in contrast to the outer turmoil. Instinctively the travellers drew closer to each other, and their tongues were loosened.

The rider struck his saddle-bow with a passionate hand, at which the plodding grey faintly started.

"To think of her, at Cassel, under the devil flicker of that imperial puppet's glance! Sidonia, my wife, at the Court of Jerome!"

"A waterlily may defy the ooze," observed Geiger-Hans, sententiously.

But the simile was hateful to the youth—a water-lily, a flower that flourishes, in atrocious beauty, upon the very slime! Then he cursed his wound for its slow healing, and his blood for its ill-timed fever, and the length of the road, and the perversity of women.

"And the wrong-headedness of young men!" added the musician, drily.

But thereafter, in tones of consolation, for dudgeon reigned on the saddle above him, he pointed to a light far off through the dark flicker of leaf and shadowy march of trees.

"See, yonder shall we sup and sleep, and thence, rested, start in the brisk dawn. And to-morrow——"

"To-morrow!" interrupted the bridegroom, impatiently. "No; I shall be in Cassel to-night."

"You forget the times we live in, comrade," came the fiddler's answer. "Why, here is my nobility afoot; and yours, all wounded, upon a sorry steed, because any less notable progression were to court suspicion, putting aside the fact that your worship's carriage and horses (Sidonia would have none of them, and if you were not otherwise matched you two would be one by pride, comrade) have been requisitioned for the use of the State. And Frantz fled with his master's dressing set, his English pistols, and his second portmanteau! Court suits I make no doubt, tut, tut. The fellow was a rogue. I saw it at half a blink. And worthy Peter, our postilion, bitten with the war fever and passed over to the Prussians! Nay, but

'tis a riddance that suits me. And here we go as I love, at our own free will, save, indeed, that we enter not Cassel to-night. Have you already forgotten that we are at war, in Westphalia? Not, I grant you, that it signifies much to our pretty monarch—so long as it does not interfere with his amusements at home. He has thought it wise, nevertheless, to make a little fortress of his capital—breastworks and glacis where lay the orchards and cottage gardens; posterns and *corps de garde* at all road entrances, and everything closed at the setting of the watch, an hour after sundown!"

Steven the lover had, in his mind's eye, seen his pilgrimage ended before the fall of the day; seen himself dashed or crowned. Crowned! Upon the vision the surge rose in his heart till it overpowered him well-nigh to swooning.

Geiger-Hans, with his diabolic insight, chose this moment to draw from his fiddle a sudden strain.

"Oh, stop!" panted the young man. "I cannot bear it."

And the player fell silent, musing upon the ways of men and women and of love. Let a bride but elude her lover's embrace, what surer road shall she find to a revealing of his ardour?

CHAPTER XXII
THE CABINET NOIR

"*Good even, sir,*
But what, in faith, make you from Wittenberg?"
(*Hamlet*).

Night had completely fallen. A full moon was forging up the sky, like some superb ship beating up the wind, all sail spread and defying the tumultuous seas of cloud, when the comrades emerged from the woodland and halted before the inn.

"The Three Ways," for a poor roadside house, held unwontedly merry company to-night, to judge by the medley of shout and song that rang out from its upper windows.

The fiddler, mounting the steps that led to the door, gave a few knocks with special emphasis. To this there was no response. Laughing silently, he waited

awhile, then suddenly betook himself to his violin, at its highest pitch. Too much engrossed with their own music, unhearing, perhaps, through the rolling of the wind, the first-floor revellers paid no heed to knocks or notes; but below there was immediate stirring. The bolts screeched under a hasty hand.

"Ach! you, Geiger-Onkel!" cried the hostess, as she stood revealed on the threshold. "You will have your joke! ... We thought it was the police commissary's rap! Ah, heavens, what times these are! One's heart is in one's throat all day, all night."

She clasped her hands upon her flat bosom, but suddenly catching sight of the rider, forgot to pant that she might the better stare.

"'Tis but a new brother of mine," said the fiddler, carelessly. "Send the kerl for his horse.—So you have some of the boys here? Well, I bring news for them. Come, comrade, you must be weary."

In the kitchen, amid otherwise pleasing surroundings, their nostrils were offended by an extraordinary reek of stale wine, presently traceable, it seemed, to a postilion in dilapidated uniform, who was ensconced within the glow of the hearth.

The man's high collar and braided jacket were open for the freer intercourse of throat and can; he winked impudently at Geiger-Hans, and had a truculent roll of the eyes for Steven.

"Interception of the King's mail—*lèse majesté*—crime of the first category—punishment capital," observed he, with some pride, in answer to the young man's astonished look.

"The punishment includes all accessory to the act," suggested Geiger-Hans, pleasantly.

"Not the victim of coercion," stated the postilion, with indifference.

He turned his tankard upside down as a hint to the hostess. She, poor thing, seemed to regard these doings as a hare may the trap that clutches her pad.

"The gentlemen are upstairs," she said, and wiped the dampness from her lip with the corner of her apron.

The gentlemen upstairs continued to make their presence uproariously patent.

"The Brotherhood are apparently having a little argument," quoth Geiger-Hans, with a slight smile.

"For heaven's sake, Onkel, go up and quiet them, if you can! We shall have the patrol upon us!" groaned the hostess.

"Now, comrade," said the fiddler to Steven, one foot upon the narrow stairs, "I will now introduce you into nobler company than ever! I have made you known to one of the newest kings and to one of the oldest Burgraves in the land. To-night you shall become acquainted with the offspring of a nation in

chains—heroes, my little count, no less. Patriots of the first water!"

Count Kielmansegg was conscious that the corners of his highborn lips drooped. The patriotism of Westphalia—convulsions of a tin kettle on a mere corner of the vast Napoleonic fire, pot-house heroes that roared their enthusiasm into the night to the clink of the can.... Bah!

There was a twinkle in the musician's eye that mocked his words. He went nimbly up the stair, and his companion followed with the heavy foot of fatigue.

A drunken shout greeted the entrance of Geiger-Hans. Steven stood on the threshold, his lip curling into ever more open scorn at the sight which greeted them: three dishevelled youths, in different humours of intoxication, extravagantly costumed according to the taste of the militant *Studiosus*: tunics of velvet, shabby but much befrogged; jack-boots, gigantic spurs that had, doubtless, never pressed horse's sides; poetically open collars; uncut hair; tobacco-pouch and rapier on belt; china pipes in hand, six feet long, tasselled with Fatherland colours. A squat individual, exuberantly bearded, sprawled at the head of the table and was expostulating with vehemence. He had embraced the can of wine and was defending it with drawn spadroon against the other two, who—the one with uproarious laughter, the other with tipsy solemnity—were making futile attempts to wrest it from his possession. The table was strewn with letters and papers.

No sooner did this same hirsute *Bursch* perceive Geiger-Hans than he abandoned both sword and can and, staggering to his feet, opened wide his arms.

"Welcome, brother—master—friend!" exclaimed he, dithyrambically.

"*Salve!*" then cried the laughing student, pounced upon the abandoned can and buried his impertinent sandy face in its depths. Whereupon the melancholy third, whose long black hair fell about a cadaverous countenance, sank into his chair.

"*Vilis est hominis natura*," lamented he; then suddenly broke into the vernacular and shook his fist at the drinker: "Thou rag!"

"*Salve, fratres!*" responded the fiddler, by no means surprised, it seemed, at his reception, but neatly avoiding the threatened embrace. "How beautiful it is," he went on, "thus to see the saviours of their country at work upon her interests, even when the rest of the world sleeps!" He pointed to the letters as he spoke.

An inflamed but exceedingly alert eye was here fixed upon Steven over the rim of the can.

"*Prudentia!*" cried the drinker, flung down the vessel and ran forward, "a stranger among us!"

With a bellow the bearded one lurched for his weapon.

"A stranger? ... *Pix intrantibus*!"

The weeper profited of the excitement to seize, in his turn, upon the aban-

doned vessel.

"Nay," said Geiger-Hans, arresting the double onslaught with outstretched arms. "*Pax intrantibus* be it: we are friends!"

Steven stood in the doorway, sneering. He would have found a pungent satisfaction in laying flat the drunken couple—and no doubt, with the science cultivated in Jackson's London rooms, would, despite his wound, easily have put the thought into execution. He made a movement forward. But the fiddler held him at arm's length.

"Peace, brother Peter—peace, most learned doctor *in herbâ*. I bring a friend, I say, a new brother, my comrade, a noble Austrian who, by the way, is half an Englishman, and as bitter a foe to the tyrant as your most Germanic selves. I introduce:—Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg—Herr Paul Oster, 'Mossy-Head,' *emeritus* swordsman, Senior of the Great Westphalic conspiracy. Behold, count, the true German garb, the type of manly beauty! Behold this Barbarossa head! Behold the sword, in short (if I may so express myself), of a great patriotic movement. And here," turning with a fresh gesture of ceremony, "we have the brain, the tongue, the acute eye: in other words, Herr Theophilus Schmeling, legal doctor, jurist, fresh from all his honours at Goettingen—and the third...?" He looked interrogation at the black-haired student.

The jurist, surprisingly alive to the situation, answered briskly for his melancholy comrade, who was still absorbed and absorbing:

"Johannis Stempel, *Sanctæ Theologiæ Studiosus*. An 'Ancient House,' also a faithful heart—a good labourer in the vineyard—but," he added chuckling, "apt to be *weinerisch im Wein*, whiny over the wine."

He perpetrated his atrocious quip with a wink of little red eyes.

Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg found some pleasure in bowing three times with ironical ceremony.

But Geiger-Hans took up the tale again with a dry disregard of any possibility of humour.

"Here we are, I repeat, in the heart of a great conspiracy ... and not one of us but risks his neck by so much as merely looking on! The Sword, the Law, the Church. 'Tis a conspiracy well headed!"

As he waved his hand, Steven's eyes were directed towards the table, and he suddenly realized that the papers lying in such disorder were the contents of the mail-bag that hung on the arm of the theologian's chair. His thoughts went back to the dilapidated courier downstairs: "Crime of the first category," had said that official.

"Bah!" cried the Jurist, "Jerome does not kill; he but fleeces his little flock, as all the world knows."

"Your pardon, doctor," retorted the fiddler, with a fine inciseness in his tone.

"The most paternal government makes an example now and again. And the head of one Carl Schill is this moment affixed, minus its body, on the toll-gate of Helmstadt. But reassure yourselves, the odious French invention of Dr. Guillotin has not yet superseded your old Germanic square-sword; your heads would be hacked off in the true heroic style. 'Tis a consolation."

"Augh!" groaned Barbarossa, and sank into his seat at the head of the table, clasping his middle as if a sober sickness had fallen upon him. His very beard seemed to turn pale. But presently it flamed again with a revulsion of anger:

"What the hangman! How is one to manage these fools? They sit, and soak, and sop, and suck, and enough to snick twenty necks on the table before them. I told them so, just now, when I wished to put the wine away."

"The can is empty," here intoned the theologic *Studiosus*, after the manner of one giving out a psalm. "*Nunc est bibendum—Aut bibe aut abi!*"

From behind his beard the Senior growled like a dog. But the Jurist intervened.

"Content ye," he said softly. "I'll to the letters; and here's a cool head will help me. Will you not, Geiger-Hans—good Geiger-Hans? And we shall but crack a bottle between us, just to clear our brains. Shall we not, musician of my heart?"

"Yes; *aut bibe aut abi—sauf oder lauf*—drink or slink," chanted the divine, afresh.

"*Doctorlein*," said the musician, suavely, "I am with you. And the devil's own head you must have," he pursued, looking at the Jurist with a kind of admiration; "for I'll be sworn you've drunk as much as the other two put together—but I pray you, a word first: wherefore the King's mail?"

"Your question is reasonable," responded the other with renewed verbosity. "*Providus, homo sagax*.... The defendant's request is allowable, worthy Senior.... Are you defendant, by the way, or pursuer?"

"Accomplice," said the fiddler, sitting down and gathering a sheaf of letters into his hand. "To the point again, brother: why the King's mail?"

"Two warrants, we are informed, are out against the Brotherhood. And here"—the student slapped his greasy tunic—"you behold equity contravening judgments: legal sagacity tripping up edicts; the true principle—for if your lawyer is not the antidote to the law, what is he? Answer me that! Ah, here comes the wine! No more cans, but bottles! Our landlady knows how to treat gentlemen. Nay, nay, *Pastorlein*, get you to sleep again, and dream of your first sermon. There is work to be accomplished here. Mrs. Hostess, give him small-beer in the can—he will never know the difference!"

Geiger-Hans, who had rapidly sorted the letters in his hand, raised his eyes and cast a look about him. The Senior, sunk in a heap upon his chair, was staring straight before him with a glowering eye, unmistakably in the first stage of

drunken stupefaction. The aspirant divine was whimpering over the strangely inferior taste of his tipple. Steven, leaning against the whitewashed walls with folded arms, stood looking upon the scene, weary, arrogant, detached.

"Hey, Sir Count," said the fiddler then to him with one of his rare sweet smiles, "what say you—a glass of wine? No? Why, then, what will your lordship do while we manipulate affairs of State ... in this *Cabinet Noir*?"

For the life of him, Steven could not display haughtiness to Geiger-Hans, however dubious might seem his proceedings. Too much he knew of him by this time, yet too little.

"Nay," said he, giving him back a faint smile. "I see a couch yonder. I will try a sleep, till the State of Westphalia is secured, or undone, for I am woefully tired."

"The couch? Right," said the fiddler, nodding. "Yes, go to sleep, comrade, and dream.—Here with that heap, brother conspirer. And now, listen: the wise commit no unnecessary crimes. We have no business with the private correspondence of the good folks of Cassel. But here is a document with an official seal, addressed to the Commissary of Police, Goettingen."

He tossed the letter across the table. There was a shout of triumph from the Jurist.

The horsehair couch was hard enough, but Steven had flung himself on it with a whole-souled desire to shut out a sordid, unsatisfactory world. Sleep, however, the jade, is not to be had for the wooing. The whines of the Theologian, the stertorous breathing of Barbarossa, the Jurist's flow of rhetoric, the crackling of the papers, the fiddler's very mutism, were all so many goads to drive him into ever more feverish wakefulness. Against the rigid bolster his heart-beats resounded in his brain. "Sidonia, Sidonia!" they said, in maddening persistence. And then, as in a sort of vision, he would see the paltry Don Juan, King Jerome, with his flickering eyes, and start, with a spasm of anger, back to a glaring consciousness of the mean room, the guttering lights, the reek of wine and smoke, the insufferable company.

"Herr Jurist, halt, halt!" came the fiddler's voice suddenly. "Leave that alone, if you please. That is, beyond any doubt, private."

"'Tis addressed to the Arch-Enemy, and no correspondence with tyrants is private," retorted the lawyer. "Besides"—with a grin—"it's one of those new-fashioned French envelopes, and everything French is damned and doomed! See, the wafer has come unsealed in my very hand. The wise man—hic—neglects no hint of Providence. *Hey da!* what have we here? ... O thou little son of Venus, what a sweet slip of rosy paper! What a darling little claw of a hand! ... (The

King has a fine taste in doves, I'll grant him that!) Bah, Sardanapalus! It is enough to turn any man republican. I am for the rights of man. Tyrants shall have no monopoly of dovecotes. Hum! neither date nor place: a cautious dove! Chirp, chirp!" The creature pressed the sheet to his tipsy lips with disgusting lushness. "Would I held the pretty flutterer here! Hark! what does she say? '*Sir*' (A cold beginning: her feathers seem ruffled), '*I ought to be very angry with you; but, alas! anger is not to be commanded any more than love. How well it would be for us women were it otherwise!*' (Pretty dear! Ambiguous as any lawyer's statement!) '*Yet I feel that you must be forgiven, if but for the sake of duty—for I should be indeed disloyal to persist in rebellion against one who is my lawful lord.—Betty! P.S.*' (Aha! now we shall come to the true meaning, to the kernel, *medulla, medululla esculenta*, of the rosy note.) '*Understand: I promise nothing. But understand also: you may come and receive your pardon—if no more!*'"

The reader's mouth was opened upon fresh dithyrambics when the fiddler's voice rose peremptorily: "Pass me that letter!"

There fell a silence between the two. Geiger-Hans, his lean jaws propped upon his hands, sat staring at the pink sheet. The lawyer fell upon a new pile of letters with monkey-like mischief and activity. The supposed director of the *Cabinet Noir* was now snoring lustily. Its religious guide and philosopher was still pondering over the perversity of his liquor.

"Ha!" cried the Jurist, with a sudden shout, "another missive from the pink dove—same hand, same paper and cover, and addressed to no less a person than the great Chancellor Wellenshausen! Also at Heiligenstadt. Never draw such angry brows upon me, *Minnesinger* mine. I tell you, this woman positively cannot seal a letter!"

Steven lifted his head from the pillow. He heard the rustle of the opening sheet in the student's hands; then came another crow:

"Excellent, upon my *cerevies*, excellent! Listen, man. Whatever your faults are, you can laugh:

"'***Palais de Bellevue***, '"Cassel.

"'**NEVER!** "'Betty, Burgravine of Wellenshausen.'

"Thunder! 'Tis his wife! It is a whole story *à la Kotzebue*. Do you hear, Geiger-Hans? 'Tis his wife. 'Never!' she writes to him. Oh, the dove has claws and beak, and she can peck!"

Without betraying any of the exuberant mirth expected of him, Geiger-Hans leaned over and, with neat decision, plucked the letter from the other's

hands. And as the Jurist stared, wavering confusedly upon offence: "Go on with your work, friend," said the musician, smiling. "That second warrant has not yet been discovered. The night is waning. It may be well to be fairly on your road to Goettingen before the hue and cry."

CHAPTER XXIII
THE KING'S MAIL

"Ei! Kennt ihr noch das alte Lieb
Das einst so wild die Brust burchglüht,
Ihr Saiten, dumpf und trübe?
Die Engel, die nennen es Himmelsfreud;
Die Teufel, die nennen es Höllenleid;
Die Menschen, die nennen es—Liebe!"
HEINE.

Steven, whose mind had become keenly on the alert at the first mention of Betty's name, turned on his hard couch with a general relaxation of mind and body. The consoling news that it was Betty who occupied Jerome's attention fell on his jealous anguish like balm. His thoughts began to wander, rocked on the tide of the ebbing tempest. He must then have fallen into slumber, for he was suddenly back in the old Burg of Wellenshausen, with Sidonia, his little bride. She was sitting in the high-backed chair, in all her wedding finery, even as he had last seen her. But she was smiling upon him.... "*I have your letter. It was all a mistake, a great mistake*," she was saying to him. Then, as he sprang forward to take her in his arms, suddenly, with the fantastic horror of dreams, her face changed, became red, distorted, even as the face of the student. Her voice changed, too; grew raucous, broken with insupportable laughter. "*You never loved me*," it said; "*that is now clear to me. You meant well with me, I know; but it is not right—such a union as ours cannot be right, either before God or man. Had I understood before, I should have died rather than consent. But it is not yet too late. Aunt Betty says our marriage is no marriage, and she knows all about your Austrian law. Uncle Ludo has taken advice of lawyers for me; and very soon we may both be free. No—I will not see you. I will never see you again.*"

Steven sat up straight, and even at that moment there was an uproar. Geiger-Hans, creeping round the table like a cat, had fallen silently upon the student and was paralyzing, with a grasp of steel, the hand that held the letter.

The Jurist bellowed as if the executioner were already upon him, and Mossy-Head, waking up, shouted: "Treachery!" while, as if the clamour had given the finishing touch to his instability, the Theologian and the once more empty can fell in a heap on the floor. The Senior flung his drunken bulk blindly against the fiddler. Steven leaped from the couch.

Even with one hand (his left arm was still weak), anything so intoxicated was easily disposed of. He picked the "Sword of the conspiracy" off Geiger-Hans, who thereupon, finding himself free to deal with "the Brain," possessed himself at once of the letter. The musician's thin cheeks were faintly touched with scarlet, and his nostrils worked with quick breathing; otherwise he seemed unmoved. Steven, therefore, was all the more astonished to hear him exclaim with utmost disgust, utmost scorn and anger:

"*Palsambleu!* but I am weary of this! Drunken swine! Out with them to some sty! Roll your fellow forth, count, and down the stairs. If your shoulder smarts, you have sound legs at least ... and riding-boots!"

The wine, which had seemed so long merely to stimulate him, here suddenly took melting effect upon the student of law. He twisted in the fiddler's grasp, flung both his arms round his neck, and, embracing him with the ejaculation: "O thou dear, ancient one!" showed an instant inclination to slumber on his shoulder.

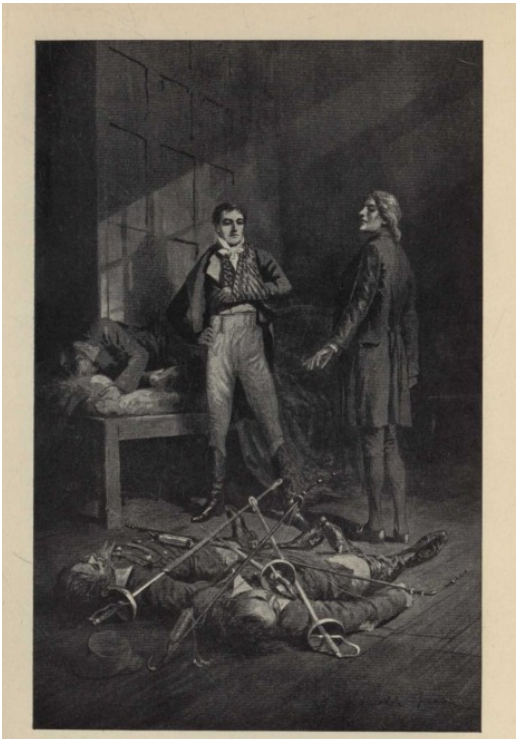
"Pah!" exclaimed Geiger-Hans, and disengaged himself with what seemed to Steven surprising vindictiveness. He then trundled his man into the passage. The door of an empty bedroom, flooded with moonlight, stood suggestively open; here he cast the creature from him; threw sword, scabbard and pipe on top of the grunting body.

Steven, in perfect gravity, followed his friend's example; but, with more mercy, deposited his burden on the billows of the feather bed.

"There is yet another," quoth the fiddler, dusting his hands. Disgust was upon him. He was Geiger-Hans no longer, but a *grand seigneur* with a vengeance, offended in all his Versailles refinement. He led Steven back into the room. "We shall have to carry the hog. Take you his feet, while I his greasy poll."

The Theologian had not even a grunt. They spread him beside the Jurist in the moonlight—with a certain effect of symmetry, like fish on a slab.

Geiger-Hans locked the door on the outside and pocketed the key. A second, then he and Steven stood together in the darkness of the landing. Except for the snores from within the room and for similar sounds rising from the kitchen below, the inn of The Three Ways was wrapped in stillness.



They spread him beside the Jurist in the moonlight—with a certain effect of symmetry.

They spread him beside the Jurist in the moonlight—with a certain effect of symmetry.

Outside, the gale, which had long been waning, had now fallen.

"That is the courier, I take it," said the wanderer. "Did I not say, my noble friend, that I would bring you into the company of heroes? Listen to them! Thus do we conspire in Westphalia!"

When they re-entered the room, the musician went instantly to the window and, opening it wide, stood inhaling in deep draughts the clean airs of the woods. It was that most silent, most mysterious hour of the whole circle—the hour before dawn. More silent and more mysterious, this night, it seemed because of the storm that had passed. Nature was exhausted after her passion, merely shaken by a faint reminiscent sigh that came stealing with scarce the quiver of a leaf, as from a tired heart.

The night sky held a strange depth of blue against the garish yellow lamplight within; the stars were paling. With head, thrown back, the wanderer stood gazing upwards. There were moods of his strange comrade that Steven had learned to respect. He therefore neither spoke nor approached; but, after completing the purification of the room by the simple process of turning out all the cans and bottles, he sat down and waited, absorbed in his own painful reflections. At last Geiger-Hans drew a deep breath, and, leaving the window open, sat down facing his companion. The contents of the rifled mail-bag lay between them.

The musician's face looked pale and severe. Still in silence, he began to toss such packets as had escaped violation back into the bag.

"Will you give me my letter, please?" said Steven, dully. Then his youth and hot blood betrayed him into a cry: "Oh, I am miserable!"

The older man glanced at him from under his eyebrows. It was an odd thing—for what was he, after all, but a poor, half-crazed, broken gentleman? yet there was a certain smile of this Geiger-Hans which made the world seem warm to the rich and highborn Steven.

"O blessed unhappiness of youth!" cried the musician in his old manner, mocking yet passionate. "Did you but know it, these pangs, these sighs, will be sweeter to the memory of your old age than your youth's most satisfied ecstasies! Here is your letter, boy. Go, weep and rage upon it, if you will, with all the fury of your checked aspiration.... What, you open your arms, and she is not ready forthwith to fall into them? You condescend to run after her, and she does not instantly stand still to be caught! You thought that to-morrow's sun would see you with your bride in your embrace, and behold! you have yet to woo her? Bewail your hard fate, you are indeed to be pitied!"

"Would you not like your fiddle?" cried Steven, as he caught the half-folded sheet that the musician tossed towards him, "that you may set my folly to a tune? When you want to sermonize, I had rather you did it on the strings, if you don't mind."

For a second Geiger Hans seemed about to resent the pettish speech as an impertinence. A frown gathered; but, with a short laugh, broken by a deep sigh, he resumed his air of sad serenity.

"Nay," said he, stroking the strings of the instrument that Steven pushed towards him, and then laying his hand flat upon them to still their wailing, "did I make music to-night, it would not be music for your youth. Fool!" said Geiger-Hans, fixing his mad, brilliant eyes upon Steven, "is she not living, she whom you love? and you prate to me—to me, of unhappiness!"

Though the words were harsh, his tone was strangely gentle. Had Steven dared, he would have put out his hand to touch the speaker.

The wind was rustling through the trees; there came a stir and a murmur from the woods; the purple-blue depth of the sky seemed to quiver with pallid changes.

"It is the dawn," said the fiddler, in a worn voice. "Get you to that couch again, for you must sleep, and we have a day of action before us. Aye, take that letter with you and lay it under your cheek. If it seem cruel, have not her fingers touched it? Ah, if you but knew from what a wounded heart, perhaps, sprang those reproachful words! Why, if she has pride, man, will she not be the fitter mate for you? And if she will have naught of a loveless marriage, is it not because she would have love? Poor little Sidonia ... who only yesterday was a child! You have awakened a woman's heart in her; see that you know how to meet that heart's measure."

Steven stood by the couch, palpitating to the words, to the golden visions they opened before his fevered eyes.... Sidonia, the child, with her yellow plaits of hair, with her eyes brown and green, clear yet deep, like the brook under the trees.... Sidonia, whose lips he had kissed; who had smiled at him under her bridal veil!

Geiger-Hans had said he would make no music; but it was the music of the gods his words had evoked in the dawn. Presently the older man looked up from his dreary abstraction: Steven, stretched on the sofa in all the abandonment of young fatigue, was sleeping like a child. The watcher's features relaxed.

"*O bella Gioventu...*!" he murmured. Then he looked down at the scattered sheets before him, and his lips twisted in bitter mockery. Here had been a night's work of petty crime under the fine-sounding title of patriotism and national conspiracy. But might not now some good be brought out of it after all? How sound the fellow slept! Not that he, the wanderer, envied any sleeper but him that would never wake.—Well, to work!

He took up, with contemptuous fingers, Burgravine Betty's easy lines of surrender to the royal Don Juan. It was clear that she was vastly flattered at the thought of becoming one of the *mil e tre*. But Betty had a husband...! Yes, the

butterfly should be saved, if it were only for the sake of the pure child who had, as yet, no better shelter than those fragile gaudy wings.

He re-read the lines destined to the King, and smiled. Then he turned over the other sheet with his forefinger. The pregnant "Never!" sprang again at him out of the page, in Betty's flourish.

The fiddler smiled again.

* * * * *

Through the open window a shaft of sunlight struck the sleeper's forehead. Geiger-Hans rose to draw the wooden shutter. But Steven frowned and awoke.

Without, the forest was one golden lyric. It was an autumn day of sparkle and scurry. A flock of migrating birds were calling to each other over the yellowing tree-tops. Against the pale, exquisite blue of a sky such as September alone seems to give, the rooks were circling in fantastic squadrons.

From the dappled glades came an unseen stir of soft furred things; things on vibrating wings, busy or merely merry, snatching the last bright hour before the end. Into the middle of a straight forest clearing, all faint amber with fallen pine needles, a stag pricked his way with high and dainty steps; then turned his noble head, caught some scent of danger and leaped into the bracken, which closed in waves over him.... The very spirit of the woods incarnate!

It seemed shame to be sullenly sleepy on such a morning. Steven breathed the bright air, and his ill-humour vanished.

"That is well," said Geiger-Hans, as if the young man had spoken. "Nature sets us the example: what work she has to do, she does happily. Be brisk, comrade; we have also a task before us, and an immediate. The mail-bag is ready. We must now start master courier again on his interrupted duty. Heaven knows in what state we shall find the clown; we shall doubtless have to pump on him! ... Then, to Cassel!"

Melodious snores were yet intercrossing each other in the locked bedroom as they passed down the stairs. But the postilion was awake. He lay full length on the bench, with face upturned to the rafters, staring stupidly at a bunch of herbs immediately above him, his eyes totally devoid of speculation.

Early as it was, the household of that solitary house was astir. A fire was crackling in the hearth, and a fresh sound of water came from an inner room. The host of The Three Ways stood in the wide-open house-door looking into the empty road. He turned quickly at the sound of their steps and grinned in greeting as he saw Geiger-Hans.

"Good morning, Mr. Host," said the musician. "Fine doings have you had here the night!"

"Students' tricks, students' tricks," said the host, suddenly uncomfortable, and slouching back into the kitchen as he spoke. His small eyes blinked furtively away from the sight of the mail-bags which Geiger-Hans now heaved on the table. "Bah!" pursued he, "I knew nothing! I busy not my head over gentry's doings or students' pranks. I go to sleep. They concern me not." Then he burst into a chuckle. "Popped him into a wine-cask, they did, in the backyard of The Bunch of Grapes, down at Cassel, where the fellow takes his nip before going his round. And they sat on the cask, the three of them, singing and smoking their pipes—drove past the French soldiers who looked on and laughed—out of the town gates, and not a finger lifted to stop them! Upon my soul, it was a fine joke! The cart is out yonder, and the cask, too!" he added, and chucked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the sunlit yard, shaking the while with a laugh that might have struck the observer as a trifle forced.

"Your jokers are still enjoying the sleep of a blameless conscience," said Geiger-Hans. "They lie in your best bedroom, Mr. Landlord. I locked them in, lest your good wine should lead their innocence and lightheartedness into new jokes ... that might be less excellent." He took the key from his pocket and tossed it on the table. "Release the birds when you think fit," he added.

The landlord took up the key with alacrity. Geiger-Hans remained awhile musingly fixing the outstretched form of the postilion; then a faint laugh shook him in his turn.

"In a wine cask," commented he. "A right old German jest, not without its gross humour...! He did aver they had kidnapped him: the creature spoke truth!"

Mine host almost perpetrated a wink, but checked himself and coughed.

"Oh, these students!" he reiterated vaguely.

"No wonder the beast smells like a bottle-brush," cried Steven, curling up his nose. Here, then, was the explanation of that stench of wine which had sickened him the night before, and which even now the sweeping breeze could scarcely conquer.

"The High-Born has perfect reason," cried the innkeeper, "for the rascal is sopped, within and without. If you squeezed him, he would run vinegar.—Well, so long as I am paid!..." was the philosophic parenthesis. "But the wife has shaken him in vain. There he lies, and it were perhaps as wholesome he should jog." His glance moved uneasily towards the mail-bag. "And what is to be done with that?" it seemed to ask.

"Quite so," said Geiger-Hans, gravely. "Has he not his letters to deliver? They will be one post late; but in Westphalia, nowadays, we are not so mighty particular, are we? He must be freshened up, I think. Here, friend, I and my comrade will bring him to the trough, and you shall do the pumping. We'd better off with his jacket first. Never look so doubtful, Mr. Landlord. If his Majesty

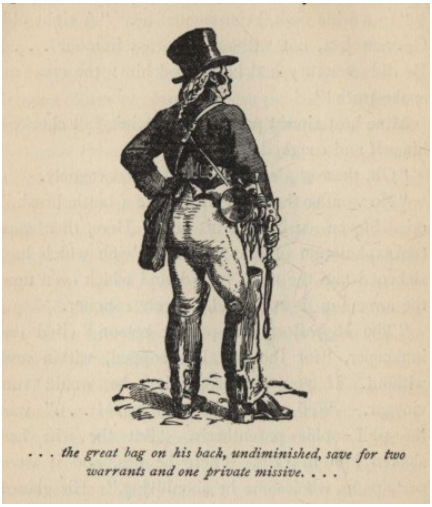
hears of it, you may be decorated. Think of that!"

"Saints forbid!" said the host, turning pale. "If Jerome heard of it, I might be shot."

"Nay," said Geiger-Hans, cheerfully, "you may take my word for it; the days are counted within which there will be either decorations or executions in the name of Jerome. But, meanwhile, to our duty! Never look so disgusted, little comrade. This is a vile beast, as you said; but in a minute we shall have him purified."

* * * * *

It was, indeed, a purified courier, a chastened and subdued mail-bearer, who trotted his way on through the forest, astride that self-same horse that had dragged him forth in his reeking prison the night before. He had the great bag on his back (undiminished save for two warrants and one private missive—one, indeed, that had already reached its proper destination), a gold piece in his pocket, and a plausible tale of violence and rescue to tell, should it ever be required of him.



. . . the great bag on his back, undiminished, save for two warrants and one private missive. . . .

... the great bag on his back, undiminished, save for two warrants and one private missive....

CHAPTER XXIV
PORTENTS

"Hüt bich, mein Freund, vor schwarzen, alten Kasen,
Doch schlimmer sind die weissen, jungen Käschen....!"
HEINE.

There was brilliant sunshine as Steven rode in at the gate of Cassel. The fiddler walked beside him; but, once within the town, he halted, waved his hand, and called out:

"Good-bye."

"How?" cried Steven, drawing rein, his heart sinking at this unexpected parting.

"Ah, little bridegroom!" said Fiddler Hans, "it is even so. And a pretty figure," he said, "should I be, to shadow your lordship's magnificence in this fashionable city!"

He stepped across the cobbles, laid his hand on the horse's neck, and looked up at the young man; all mockery fled out of his eyes.

"You are an honest lad," he said, "and you love her—go, tell her the naked truth."

* * * * *

In her pink-hung bed at the Bellevue Palace, Betty von Wellenshausen opened a sleepy eye upon her surroundings. She yawned and stretched herself. It was good to wake up in Cassel and feel the bustle of life about her, the gay and ceaseless movement, instead of the rarefied loneliness of Wellenshausen on the crags, where the morning might find her higher than the clouds themselves, with perhaps scarce the beat of a bird's wing across the awful stillness.

Yes, it was *du dernier agréable* in the *Residenz*—Betty's thoughts ran naturally to French—to be aroused to the prospect of a day full of the most new and diverting experience.... Positively, Jerome was a charming fellow!...

... It was, perhaps, a trifle strong to ask for a secret rendezvous on the strength of one meeting; but Betty did not regret her answer. Without being at all prepared to yield—gracious powers, was one not to enjoy oneself a little? ... after three years of Wellenshausen!

In the midst of these gossamer resolves, the door creaked apart.

The Burgravine rubbed her eyes and thought she must be still dreaming, for through the aperture peered the heavy countenance, the bristling head of her husband—actually of the Burgrave of Wellenshausen himself!

She sat up, her lace cap awry upon the starting dark curls, her cherry mouth open, her eyes round, the very image of astonished indignation. With ponderous tip-toe tread, not unlike that of a wild boar stepping out of covert, the husband entered the room. He closed the door behind him and stood smiling, half timidly, half fatuously. Betty's clenched hands flew up in the air and down again on the sheets.

"How dare you!" she gasped. "Did I not forbid you——?"

"Oh, come now, Betty, my little wife, my little dove, I've frightened you. You were asleep, angel? But when I got your letter, last night, I lost not an instant. His Majesty gave me leave—urgent private affair. Post haste I came from Heiligenstadt. In Cassel with the dawn—a mouthful of breakfast to while away the time—a little toilet, and here I am. Shaved, my treasure! Your dear little letter——"

"My ... my dear little letter?" Betty shrieked, eyes rounder, curls more startled than ever. She sat rigid. "My dear little letter!" she repeated under her breath once more. Then, as she recalled the missive in question, she was shaken with an irresistible giggle. Her face dimpled. The Burgrave, gazing on her amorously, thought her the most ravishing, the most maddening being ever created for the delight or torment of man.

"Your letter, my Betty, to Heiligenstadt," he murmured, drew a pink sheet from his breast pocket, and carried it to his lips. "What wonder that, upon receipt of this, I could not delay coming to my sweet Betty a minute longer!" He held the note at arm's length. "Your wifely, your dutiful words: '*I should indeed be disloyal to persist in rebellion against my lawful lord.*'"

Now, at a flash, the situation was laid clear before her:—by some inconceivable carelessness she had put her correspondence of two days ago in the wrong covers! ... A plague on this new-fangled French invention of envelopes!

She shut her lips with a snap and swallowed down the cry that rose to them. Rapidly she tried to recall that elegant reply to the royal importunities which had given her so much satisfaction; and then all other feelings were lost in a gush of gratitude to the Providence that had suggested those ambiguous terms which saved the situation—saved Betty, Burgrave of Wellenshausen, from premature discovery, irreparable disgrace.

She turned and smiled adorably on the Burgrave.

"Monster," she murmured, "do you deserve forgiveness?"

* * * * *

Steven halted at the first inn on his way, at the sign of the *Aigle Impérial*—a new French sign upon an old and solidly Germanic house. Here he put up his horse and engaged a room.

The best he could obtain was on the second floor. The town was full of officers—a regular military citadel now, and Cassel, that used to be a quiet *Residenz*.... Honourable guests could no longer be entertained as was their due, mine host informed him with a shrug of the shoulders. Steven, however, was indifferent enough; it was not his purpose to remain an hour longer in Jerome's capital than he could help. Indeed, he dropped some words concerning the equipage he would probably require—it might be that very evening—which gave the landlord an insight into a long purse and magnificent habits of travel.

This worthy, therefore, sped the stranger towards the Royal Palace with far greater urbanity than he had displayed on his arrival, and stood staring after him with some curiosity:—unattended, upon a bony old horse, and airs of a prince withal ... a sable cloak than which the King himself wore no better ... and we want, if you please, a travelling carriage and four of the best horses obtainable. We don't mind buying if they are not to be hired.... *Oho, ei, ei!*

"The town is turned into a citadel." The words recurred to Steven as he swung down the ill-paved street. The very air throbbed to military rhythm. In the fields, without the walls and on the new ramparts, everywhere, levies were being exercised, to judge by the tramp of feet, the calls and counter calls of bugles, the distant blare of marching bands, the beat of drums, cries of command, rattle of sham fire. The little brown town itself was filled with the most heterogeneous throng—Hanoverian and Westphalian hangers-on of the Court; French and Corsican adventurers; soldiers of as varied nationalities as were the uniforms of Jerome's fretful fancy; grenadiers, late of his brother, briefly royal of Holland, in their red coatees; wonderful blue hussars (French most of them) very gallant, with a wealth of jangle, whether ahorse or afoot—these same wonderful blue hussars, some of whom Steven had seen driven by the sheep-skin Cossacks like wrack before the storm; *dragons d'Espagne*, in green and orange, stern, lean and war-worn (unscrupulously intercepted, these, on their way to rejoin their imperial leader, and here disdainful of pinchbeck king and petty service); stolid Westphalian recruits lounging along the cobbles with the slouch of discontent; astounding diplomats driving about, clad in astounding embroideries; academicians, too, with the green palm on coat-tail and cuff, for "Little Brother Jerome" played at being as like big brother Napoleon as might be.

Market boors plodded by, blue-stockinged, crimson-waistcoated and wide-hatted; shapeless country wenches tramped, and fair ladies, reclining in coaches, flashed past Steven; and quite a swarm of lackeys, postilions, chasseurs, with all the insolence of the servants of dissolute masters, elbowed him aside, or ap-

praised him with open comment. Had he not been so absorbed in his private anxiety, he might have noted, in spite of the air of gaiety, the bustle and the extravagance, certain ominous signs of impending cataclysm around him—the swift passage here and there of an urgent courier; the grave countenances of some officials; the little groups, whispering together in by-streets, dissolving at the first hint of approaching police; the singing defiance of the students; the sullenness of the poorer burghers; and, above all, the febrile, over-strained note in the very merriment of the ruling class itself. There was a tinkling of madcap-bells at the Palace of Jerome that rang into the town; no one within those walls had a mind to hearken to the reverberating echoes of Berlin and Hamburg and Dresden.

Heartily as he despised the sovereign and his army; careless as he was, in the absorption of his own vexed affairs, of the dire threat that hung upon the land, Steven could not but find something inspiriting in the martial sounds and sights. Unconsciously his step fell to the measure of some distant drums. He had a valiant sense of marching upon victory as he turned into the palace courtyard. On the strength of his splendid air, the sentries saluted him without challenging. A huge green-uniformed Swiss porter bowed before him.

The first check—and it was a slight one—was that no such person as the *Gräfin* Waldorff-Kielmansegg was known at the Palace. She had to be explained as the niece of Chancellor Wellenshausen, as the young Baroness Sidonia, before her identity could be established. Then, once more, all was smiles and bows. Nothing could be easier than to see the gracious *Fräulein*. He was passed from Swiss porter to royal French lackey; conducted by the royal French lackey through several corridors and up a flight of stairs, then delivered to no less a person than dapper Kurtz, the Burgrave's own Jäger. This latter gave him first a stare, then a sharp, meaning look, but, nevertheless, introduced him without demur to a kind of ante-room. Here Steven was left; and here he had to wait a length of time, which seemed to him first ill-omened, then positively insulting.

It was a quaint room, painted with impossible nosegays of flowers and cornucopias running over with gargantuan fruit. It gave, as did the whole apartment, on the Bellevue Gardens; and, through the yellowing trees, he could see distant gleams of the Fulda, blue under a blue sky. A merry party was playing bowls on the *boulingrin*; and, though it was screened from sight by sundry formal clipped hedges, Steven could hear the interchange of voices, ladies' laughter, the banter of men.

As the minutes passed and there came to him no sound from within the apartment, the tinkling, irresponsible gaiety without grew to be a personal irritation. The very sunshine that had cheered him on his way was now a mockery; the distant tunefulness of trumpets, a boding. More than once he lifted his hands impatiently towards the bell-rope, but each time refrained: so much hung in the

balance, he must be patient. Patient! He ground his teeth as he paced the bright, absurd room.

* * * * *

Kurtz brought the message intended for Sidonia straight to the Burgravine. He was an astute young man, and knew the most likely quarter for promotion. Betty was at the moment engaged with the contents of a milliner's box, choosing a hat to wear with a certain new green redingote at the review to be held that afternoon. Something it must have of the military cock, without offending the feminine graces. It was matter of the deepest moment. But Betty, it has been hinted, had a capable mind—a facility for grasping several issues at the same time. She rose promptly to the new situation.

"Bid Baroness Sidonia come to me," she ordered. Then, tartly recalling her maid, who was edging towards the door: "Eliza, where are you going?" she cried.

"*Mon Dieu*," said Eliza, innocently, "but to inform *mademoiselle* that some one is waiting for her. And, indeed," she added, seeing by the flash of her lady's eye that her good-natured intention was frustrated—"indeed, madam, it is strange what a foolish habit we have all got into of calling madam's niece *Mademoiselle*. It is the young countess, I should say."

She clasped her hands, and was about to wax eloquent on the subject of her pleasure at M. le Comte Kielmansegg's reappearance and of her rooted conviction that they were *un bien gentil couple*, divinely destined for each other, when her mistress peremptorily reduced her to silence. Kurtz thereupon vanished in his brisk soldier way.

Betty selected another hat and set it on her curly head. It had an adorably impudent tilt and a bunch of orange cock-feathers.

"That, madame," said the French milliner, her thin elbows akimbo, her bright, familiar eyes fixed admiringly on her client—"that, madame, we call the *Shako à la Saxonne*—it is everything that is new—an inspiration after the battle of Lützen. And there is not another lady in Cassel will have anything like it."

Betty twisted her figure from side to side, and surveyed herself in the long mirror. She had donned the long narrow *redingote* to be sure of her effect, and the rich dark green of the velvet threw her face into charming relief. The orange note of the feather was the perfecting touch.

"I really think—I really think I will have it." She spoke lingeringly: these things do not decide themselves without reflection.

Sidonia came in slowly. Betty ran a keen eye over the girl; the fair hair was rough, and that was a dreadful little garment of Wellenshausen manufacture ... pale face, heavy eyes! Betty broke into a laugh. Life was really very amusing at

times.

"You sent for me, aunt?"

"Yes, my dear. Somebody has called to see you, it seems."

"To see me?" Sidonia drew her breath quickly. Crimson rushed to her face.

"Dear child," said the Burgravine, in her most cooing voice, "do not agitate yourself; you need not see him unless you wish. Yes, my love, it is that tiresome man again—my wretched cousin Kielmansegg."

Sidonia swayed a little, but caught herself up, fiercely erect; then the blood began to ebb from her cheeks.

"I will go to him," she said under her voice. "Where is he?"

"Perhaps it would be just as well," said the Burgravine, carelessly. "You can hurry matters on about the annulment. Truly, it is fortunate," she laughed, "that we shall not now have to hunt for him God knows where, in order to free you, my poor little Sidonia, from this absurd business."

"Aunt!" cried the girl, indignantly, with a glance at the milliner.—How could Aunt Betty laugh so heartlessly, how dared she discuss these most intimate affairs, before a stranger!

"Calm yourself," said the elder lady, "she does not understand one word of our savage language—too true a Frenchwoman for that, my dear! Now, about this traitor. (There you go white and red, you silly thing.) ... Everything can be settled by Yes or No! Either he wants to carry off his heiress, or he is content with your decision. He has, of course, received your letter. Heavens, my dear, did we not discuss it all before? And, anyhow, it is not a matter for heroics. Lord knows, I don't want to interfere; it is entirely for you to decide whether you are on or off with the bargain. For I will lay forty wagers he is here to protest. Ah, I know my young Viennese gentlemen; they cannot have too much gold at their back.—Decidedly, Madame Athenaïs, I keep this hat."

It was too adorable to be taken off her head even for a moment.

Sidonia stood, clasping and unclasping her hands. Every word her aunt spoke, dropped apparently with such heedlessness, but in reality with such subtle intent, stabbed her to her sore heart.

"Approach, my dear," said Betty, maternally, "and let me, for heaven's sake, run a comb through your hair. Mercy on us, child, what a gown! Had you not better change it?"

"No," said Sidonia, sullenly. She went, on leaden foot, to her aunt's toilet table and gave an unseeing touch to her hair.

Betty looked over her shoulder; the two faces were reflected side by side. Sidonia's reflection in the glass looked positively ugly—in her own eyes. In Betty's, too, apparently, for she cried, with an air of great generosity and wisdom:

"I would offer to go with you, to support you, my angel; but after what has passed—I think it were wiser he should not see me. After all, who knows? You may patch it up. But, Sidonia, you really ought to make yourself a little tidy."

Madame Athenaïs, who, if she had that ignorance of the German language attributed to her ultra-Parisian nature, had contrived nevertheless to follow the dialogue pretty closely, here interposed with the unctuous familiarity of her kind:

"Oh, if the young lady is going to have an interview of importance, it is certain she should make some toilet. See, if *mademoiselle* permits, I will show her a hat that is the very thing for the occasion. Something young, young, quite virginal, yet, coquet, alluring!—something no gentleman of taste could resist on *mademoiselle's* head!"

Sidonia—she was but seventeen, after all—stamped her foot.

"Leave me in peace, all of you!" she cried, and made for the door.

The keenest of all Betty's stabs she carried away in her heart; that was the vision of Betty herself, so fair, so distracting in her plumed hat, beside Sidonia, plain, awkward, ill-dressed—poor Sidonia whom Steven had married ... without love! Betty's words: "It were wiser he should not see me," sang in her ears to the fierce accompaniment of her own jealous blood. She recalled the smile and the glance at her own reflection in the mirror, with which Betty had pointed her concession to wisdom. Hot-tempered by nature, Sidonia had yet never even suspected the existence of such passion as now rent her.

CHAPTER XXV
THE PERVERSENESS OF WORDS

"Berriet mein blasses Angesicht
Dir nicht mein Liebeswehe?
Und willst du, dass der stolze Mund
Das Bettelwort gestehe?"
HEINE.

Steven, stretching a determined hand at last to the bell, was arrested in the act by the sound of the opening door. He turned to see Sidonia standing in the entrance.

It seemed as if, after all, these two were as yet unripe for love's fulfilment.

The pride of each, unchastened, the quick susceptibilities, the unreasonable expectations and demands of the crudely young, built frowning barriers between them.

Steven, who but last night had burned with ardour for his lost bride; who, but this morning, had set out to win her back, tender, conquering, almost joyous, felt the fretful impatience of his ten minutes of waiting leap into positive anger under the accusing glance of Sidonia's eyes. Their looks met—one might almost say, struck—like steel blades, each quick to feel and resent the other's attitude.

"Ah, no, he does not love!" cried the girl, in her heart. And—

"She never loved me," said the man in his pride. "I have been a triple fool!"

But did she think that a Waldorff-Kielmansegg was thus to be played with, made the sport of heaven knew what ignoble feminine intrigue, a marriage of convenience, quickly repented of, and then, farewell? No, he had his rights as a man, his honour to defend, and things could not end here.

"What brings you?" asked Sidonia. Being the woman, she was the first to speak.

His tone was harsh as he made answer: "Because it is time this folly should cease. Because you are my wife. Because you bear my name. Because your honour is mine, and I will not have you running about the world—under no better guard than that of Burgravine Betty."

The contempt of his accents, the doubt, stung her beyond bearing.

"By all accounts," she cried—and there was almost a sneer upon her sweet lips—"you had been willing enough, not so long ago, to trust her with your own honour."

So the fiddler had been right. Betty had made mischief! The thought danced a moment through Steven's brain; but in the confusion of anger he failed to seize its real import.

Sidonia went on, vainly endeavouring to steady her voice as it throbbed to the beating of her heart:

"You talk of honour! Is it honourable to speak of her like this—is it generous?"

"Generous?" he echoed. "Will you teach me generosity, you who drove me away, without explanation—without giving me a chance to explain? You, the bride of an hour!"

"Come, then, I am listening now. Explain." Her accent, her air, were passionately peremptory. Her fingers sought hastily in the reticule at her side—the tangible evidence of her misfortune was hidden there. She laid the note before him on the table, spreading it and smoothing it out for him, even as Betty had done for her on the wedding day, in the turret at Wellenshausen. "Explain this," she said.

Steven cast a quick glance at the incriminating document, opened his mouth upon scorn and denial, then checked himself with a bitter laugh and a shrug of the shoulders.

"Tell her the naked truth!" It was the fiddler's advice. To tell her upon what a petty rock their barque was foundering ... it ought to have been an easy thing! Yet the man stood, contemptuous, smiling, silent. Every instinct of his being revolted against the girl's haughty command. His pride alone would have kept him mute, but there was something yet stronger, more intimate, to restrain him. "Tell her the naked truth!" Naked enough was the truth, ugly enough, sordid enough, to be convincing if he could have brought himself to speak it! The truth? Why, here it would have been: "Your Aunt Betty offered herself to me, threw herself upon my protection. I did not love her, I did not want her. She gave me no choice; and this is her woman's revenge!"

Aye, it is all very well to say: "You are an honest lad." But if a gentleman has behind him long generations of gentlemen, each of whom has planned his life upon the conventional code of honour among gentlemen, he cannot easily bring his lips to form the words that will betray a woman in relation to himself—least of all, perhaps, where he has been loved and has not loved in return.

So his lips were silent upon that smile of scorn. And Sidonia's last hope—how strong it had been, how dear, she never knew till this moment—agonized within her. That he should mock her for jealousy: that was the supreme insult.

As in a flash of unbearable illumination she saw herself in his eyes, heavy-lidded, unkempt; saw the figure that had provoked just now even Betty's pity; saw beside her, Betty, rich in loveliness, velvet clad ... it was no wonder that Beau Cousin Kielmansegg should fix her with this smile, this contempt.

And Steven, in his *morgue*, who would have perished rather than condescend to explain—could he but have known (Ah, if youth but knew!) that no explanation was really needed of him, that no words are ever needed in the great crises of life! Words are our enemies. The inability to express the subtleties of wounded feeling, the false witness that our tongues bear against us, have divided more lovers secretly yearning for each other than ever did most adverse circumstances. One touch of his hand on hers, one kiss upon her lips, and Sidonia would have felt the truth, would have understood that he loved her, and that, to him who loves, the beloved is queen. Angry Steven, Steven the lover, had never even noticed the dishevelment of her bright hair. Her face was pale?—it was a pearl in his eyes. Her attire was shabby?—it might have been a garment of state. Had Betty broken in on them then, in all her glory, he would have drawn no comparison, save to the superlative advantage of the woman who was his choice.

Alas! if youth but knew!

From the bowling green without came a gust of laughter; then a light voice

broke into a stave of popular song. They had, in happier moments, heard that lilt upon the fiddle of wandering Hans; it struck them poignantly. Wounded love flamed into intemperate resentment.

"After all, Aunt Betty but told me the truth, if a little late—you have nothing to say," said Sidonia, between teeth clenched upon a sob.

"Only this," replied Steven, arrogantly, from the height of his disdain, "that I command you, as your husband, to come with me now."

Sidonia pointed to the door.

"*Herr Graf von Kielmansegg*, my uncle expects to hear from the judges today anent the annulment of that ill-considered ceremony which made me nominally your wife. His lawyers will call upon you in due course."

"Madam," answered the count, bowing, "I intend to take up my abode in Cassel—at the *Aigle Impérial*. Therefore there will be no difficulty about my address. But let me remark that annulments are not easily concluded without the consent of both parties."

He closed the door between them upon these words.

"He does not love me—he never loved me!" said Sidonia to her bursting heart. "It was all pride!"

The other unworthy suspicions, which Betty had so subtly instilled, could not live in her soul after having come again under the glance of Steven's eye. But she had pride too, her woman's pride, and it showed her what she had to do, even though it killed her.

"O Geiger-Onkel," cried the poor child, "what have you brought me to! Even you have abandoned me!"

Betty's arrows, shot at spiteful random, occasionally hit a truer mark than she herself suspected. When, in her tower prison, she had petulantly averred that the Burgrave would certainly keep in his own hands the choosing of Sidonia's husband (and for very good reasons!) she had unconsciously struck the gold. The heiress's guardian did not intend, if it could be helped, to have his accounts examined. Hence, apart from the humiliating pressure put upon him, against which his elementary violence rebelled, the young Austrian was the last person the Burgrave would have desired as nephew-in-law. There was a relentlessness in the young man's eye and a clear penetration, which, whenever the Burgrave remembered them, sent uncomfortable chills through his frame. True, Count Kielmansegg had never breathed one syllable on the subject of his bride's fortune; but this very silence struck the Chancellor as the more ominous.

"I shall have his lawyers on top of me before I know where I am," he had many a time growled in those sullen days that followed Sidonia's betrothal,

chiefly at those hours of conscience's activity, the dull hours before the dawn, when the night's potations had ceased to stimulate.

It was not that Wellenshausen had ever been consciously dishonest. In his fine masculine, Germanic way, when he had put large sums of his ward's money to his own uses, he had felt himself almost in the right. Was it not against nature that mere females should have advantages over the male? Indeed, he had scarcely taken the trouble to make memoranda of the expenditure: in Jerome's kingdom, especially in financial matters, it was never customary to waste time upon details, and the sense of impending catastrophe, more particularly of late, had increased the sense of the value of the fleeting moment.

Since his second marriage the Burgrave had certainly taken both hands to Sidonia's treasure. There was the loan to his Royal Master; a matter of high diplomacy! It was well to have a lien over so slippery a patron. And, besides, it would be all to the child's advantage, no doubt, later on. Practically an investment! There were Betty's pearls.... Well, in these uncertain times, might not jewels also be looked upon as an investment? none the worse for having gleamed so charmingly on Betty's shoulders!

And there was this, and there was that.... In the small hours above mentioned, memory became inconveniently active. Once or twice the Burgrave had sat up in his feather-bed to wipe a clammy forehead; in truth, he did not know how much the heiress of Wellenshausen, apart from the lands, was heiress to. But there was a certain document of his late brother's, referring, in very precise terms, to the *Fideicommission*, to the trust.

It was no wonder, then, that when Sidonia had come to him, on the day of the wedding, where he sat glowering over his wine-cup and the remains of the feast, and had told him how she and her new husband had parted for ever, the relief should have been so unexpected and so great as completely to sober him.

In a spasm of paternal affection he had assured her that such a ceremony could not count, and that it would be the easiest thing in the world to release her, since she wished it.

She had looked at him stonily over her bridal white. Was that indeed the case? she had asked. She had thought marriages were for ever.

And he had laughed at her joyously. "Na, na, little dove—a marriage of this kind, if one wishes it, was as good as no marriage at all!"

"Then see to it, please," she had said steadily, avoiding his embrace.

There was horror in the look she cast upon him as she turned to leave the room; but he was too completely absorbed in his joy to see anything but the deliverance before him. He never even paused to wonder, to inquire the reason of the breach—and this, doubtless, had been well for Betty.

The connubial migration to Cassel, consent to which had been wrung from

him at the expense of so much mental agony, now became a project which could not be soon enough, to please him, put into execution. For would it not mean the prompt legal annulment of Sidonia's most inopportune alliance? His original jealousy of Beau Cousin would seem to have been the one thing really murdered in the *oubliette*; yet, perhaps, somewhere deep down in his consciousness, there faintly stirred, beneath all the other reasons for relief, a satisfaction at the thought that Cousin Kielmansegg could never again be made welcome to the house that had sheltered his divorced wife.

CHAPTER XXVI
THE WAYS OF LITTLE COURTS

"Thinkest thou there is no tyranny but that
Of blood and chains? The despotism of vice—
The weakness and the wickedness of luxury—
Of sensual sloth—produce ten thousand tyrants."
BYRON.

Betty came thoughtfully into her husband's presence. The review had not been a success. In spite of velvet *redingote* and yellow plumes, she could not flatter herself that Jerome had singled her out. She began to have qualms as to the results of that unexplained and inexplicable mistake in her correspondence. She had fully promised herself that the first glance between her and the King would delicately give him to understand that her rigour was not as eternal as the uncompromising "*Never*" might have led him to believe.

Indeed, with natural optimism, under the rosy atmosphere evolved between her mirror and the *shako à la Saxonne*, she had come to tell herself that the unintended rebuff was, perhaps, not a thing to be regretted after all. Kings or chancellors, or simple Viennese lieutenants, men were much the same, she took it. And, as the experienced French have it, *tenir la dragée haute*, was none too bad a way to make the creatures yearn for it. Was not her own Burgrave a telling proof?

But the fact remained that Jerome had not even seemed aware of her existence that afternoon. Something had gone wrong about the review. At the last

moment it had been found wiser to leave a certain regiment in barracks, information having transpired about a leaven of disloyalty. Jerome's brow had been thunder black. There had been a vast amount of discussion between him and five or six generals. And finally the King had left the field in high displeasure, before the programme of evolutions had been half concluded. And it was a painful fact that none of the populace cheered him as he went.

Certainly, if he had not looked at her, he had, at least, looked at no other fair one. Still, the day had been a failure for the Burgravine; and, as she drove back to the Palace, she had actually some doubts as to the shako. In her own apartment a new trouble confronted her. Sidonia, who had locked herself up alone after that momentous interview, now came very calmly to greet her. She had a smile on her lips, and—thus do we cherish vipers in our bosom!—Eliza's fingers had obviously been busy on the yellow head. The child was positively *coiffée*! Yes, and she was dressed, too: a fashionable creature. And pretty—undeniably pretty, in a singular, girlish way of her own. And not a word could the most insidious question draw from her lips. Betty was forced, in the end, to apply to Eliza. The tirewoman shrugged her shoulders. She knew well enough what had passed, but it was too much to expect her to gratify her mistress.

"Cannot *madame* see? Ah, it will not be long before those two are together again! If she coquets a little, *certes*, it will not be *madame* who will blame her! Oh, it is not for nothing that *mademoiselle* is making herself beautiful! Who knows if she will not meet him to-morrow night!"

"Heavens!" exclaimed the Burgravine, disagreeably struck, "you do not mean that she intends to go to the fête!"

"But, yes, madame; she has been choosing her dress. And oh, I know some one who will look pretty."

"But the deeds are actually drawn up. The marriage is as good as annulled already," cried Betty.

Eliza clacked her tongue contemptuously. "Until people are divorced, they are still married," she remarked sagely. "And it is not the young gentleman who wants a divorce, I can tell madame. 'Oh, how he is enamoured!' says Kurtz to me. 'He came in like a lion roaring,' says Kurtz. 'That is love,' he says to me. 'Beautiful!' he says."

Betty snapped herself out of her maid's hands, flung herself into a wrapper and went to seek the Burgrave.

As matters stood, the storm-wind of injured vanity and jealousy blowing very strong, she actually would rather give up her conquest of Jerome than, she thought, the sweets of revenge. In the Burgrave she had an ally—she never paused to wonder why, so little did she heed the flight of her arrows.

Before they parted, the sagacious couple, for once warmly united, were

agreed that until Sidonia were provided with another husband, they could scarcely feel themselves safe from Kielmansegg's persecution. Now, in the court of Jerome, husbands had been known to be provided for people at the shortest notice ... things had generally to be done at short notice at the court of Jerome.

Sidonia was still quite sufficiently an heiress for the Chancellor (he knew his court) to be quite sure of being able to find some excellent person who would take her thankfully from his hands without daring to request, much less to stipulate, for an exhibition of figures.

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There was a Court-concert the next night at the Royal Palace, and it was in the music-room that Sidonia was, by command, presented to Jerome.

She dropped her curtsey. Here was a King for whose royalty, in her sturdy patriotism and her inherited race tradition, she felt neither allegiance nor respect. As she drew herself up from the perfunctory obeisance, she looked him in the face and met the well-remembered glance, with its hateful gleam and flicker. Turning aside she became conscious of the gaze of the King's Master of the Horse, General d'Albignac, as he towered over his dapper little sovereign. Steady enough this, something like the glare with which the beast of prey regards his quarry. The girl's heart sank with a double terror.

"I am charmed," said the King, "to behold at last with my own eyes the young heiress of Wellenshausen, in whose lovely person, I am told, is vested so much of my territory."

This was spoken in German, with a pronounced Italian accent. Then Jerome slid into French to say caressingly:

"*Mademoiselle de Wellenshausen* is welcome at my Court."

Betty von Wellenshausen, at Sidonia's side, stood twittering, awaiting her moment. Jerome was once more in high good humour; all trace of the gloom that had weighted his brow through yesterday's afternoon was gone. Betty felt sure of triumph. Her entrance had created quite a flutter in the assembly. Women had whispered together behind their fans. Men's eyes had followed her with bold, curious looks. Her Bluebeard shadowed her with a fierce anxiety which to-night Betty accepted cheerfully as a further tribute, confident that she and his sovereign could elude it when the critical time came.

What, therefore, were her feelings when she found Jerome's eyes glinting past her—ay, past Betty von Wellenshausen at her fairest—to rest with marked interest (if ever the word "rest" could be applied to Jerome's eyes) upon Sidonia, the gawky child. There could be no mistake about it, she could not soothe herself with the thought that pique was the cause of his neglect. His attention swept by

her with no deliberate indifference; she simply did not exist for him, his interest was vividly enkindled elsewhere. In the blasting disillusion of the experience, the Burgravine turned livid. Through the buzzing in her ears she could scarce catch Sidonia's reply to the King's gracious words.

The child, however, was speaking in clear, deliberate tones, and what she was saying was sufficiently remarkable:

"Your Majesty mistakes. I am the Countess Waldorff-Kielmansegg."

What she was saying was sufficiently remarkable: "Your Majesty mistakes. I am the Countess Waldorff-Kielmansegg."

Outward decorum is the rule even at the most amateur court, yet the sensation created by the announcement Sidonia could feel to her innermost nerve.

The countenance of Jerome became as suddenly and threateningly overcast as that of a spoilt urchin thwarted. He flung a look of anger at his Chancellor. The veins swelled on the crimsoning forehead of General d'Albignac.

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The rumour that old Wellenshausen had a rich *nièce à marier* had spread very quickly through the Palace. D'Albignac remembered her quite well; it was she who had struck him over the eyes with her plaits—that added something to the zest with which the King's Master of the Horse had sought an interview that morning with the young lady's guardian. It was not unsatisfactory in its results. Ere they parted, indeed, the two thoroughly understood each other. The *ex-chouan* was hardly a match, perhaps, for a Wellenshausen; but then there was the coming scandal of the annulment! Her fortune, on the other hand, might not be now what it had been on her father's death, but it was considerable. And, again, times were bad. The Burgrave could guarantee, at any rate, that the broad lands were intact. One must make up one's mind to give and take in this world; and every one, from King downwards, was more or less in debt at the Court of Jerome—d'Albignac distinctly more than less. Besides, a pretty wife was always a good speculation at Cassel. And when d'Albignac saw Jerome fix his future bride with a well-known look, he knew that she might prove a very profitable speculation indeed. A prolonged course of "*Pompadourettes*" had begun to satiate the royal palate; here was a wild, high-born thing that carried her head like a stag, and looked out upon them all with fire in her eyes. By the side of the ogling, mincing bit of plumpness that the Burgrave had provided himself with, with all her stage tricks and fireworks, even to the chouan renegade (who was no eclectic) the contrast was grateful. And now there was this nonsense about a previous marriage to spoil all! What a pity he had not been allowed quietly to finish off the impertinent interloper that night in the forest!

* * * * *

Betty's voice broke shrilly upon the brooding pause:

"Your Majesty," she cried, "has, I believe, already received information of the true position of affairs. The marriage was no marriage. A quixotic piece of nonsense, half-hearted, soon repented, at least on one side. The deeds of annulment are actually drawn up. Count Kielmansegg's signature—or I am very much mistaken—will be promptly affixed now, and it is not to be imagined, as your Majesty will well believe, that my husband's niece will then withhold hers. It would be against all feminine delicacy, all proper pride."

She shot a look of fury at her niece; then she nudged the Burgrave, who instantly reasseverated in his deep bass:

"The deed of annulment is drawn up, sire."

Jerome's good humour returned. He rubbed his hands. In spite of all his royal assumption, much of the exuberant gesture of the Corsican had stuck to him, to the distaste of his stolid subjects.

"*Il faut aller vite, vite, alors.* We must make haste," he averred.

To make haste and enjoy was, indeed, the rule of his existence. Now, a Lent of unexampled rigour seemed inevitably drawing near him, and all the more vertiginous was his carnival. So vertiginous indeed, that, willingly blind though she was, the Queen, true German daughter of Würtemberg, had withdrawn from the whirl, giddy and panting, to take refuge at Napoleonshöhe till such time as her spouse would come to sober sense again.

Jerome considered the girl a moment longer in silence. That she should flush and pale beneath his glance, look anger at him from her deep eyes and then avert her head with an insulted turn of the neck, all added so much fuel to his easily kindled flame. He wished to go quick, quick; but if she gave him a bit of a chase, so much the better. And now he found a smile for Betty, and a gracious word, ere he passed on, taking the Burgrave by the arm. Betty might do very well for an idle hour, by-and-by, perhaps; but, heavens, how many Betties had he not known!

The Burgravine's self-esteem was at once too profound and too sensitive not to realize the completeness of her failure. But vanity has its heroines. None could have guessed, as she paired off merrily with d'Albignac, the extent of her mortification. Yet it was something very little short of torture that she was enduring as she smiled and coquetted and fanned herself, and babbled her pretty babble.

CHAPTER XXVII
THE SONG OF THE WOODS

"Das ist ein Klingen und Dröhnen
Bon Pauken und Schalmei'n
Dazwischen schluchzen und stöhnen
Die guten Engelein."

HEINE.

Sidonia slipped away alone to a shadowed window-recess. Under the insult of her aunt's words, the insult of Jerome's gaze, pain and anger had so burned within her as to exclude all other feelings. But in the "solitude of the crowd," her brain gradually cleared; and, as she reviewed the situation, a new feeling, a dread unnamed but overwhelming, began to take possession of her. With wits naturally alert, and to-night abnormally stimulated, she began to notice strange things about her. She was in danger—in danger of what, she knew not, but something horrible, unspeakable. The looks the King and d'Albignac had cast upon her, the glance of intelligence they had then exchanged, her uncle's obsequious haste to disclaim her marriage, and her aunt's public affront to her, were as many lightning flashes that showed the precipice yawning at her feet. Not a friend had she in the world to whom she could turn, save the man who did not love her, and a poor, wandering musician, now probably far away on some Thuringian road, playing gay tunes to the rhythm of his own incurable melancholy.

Unavowed, even to her own heart, these two days the thought had haunted her that perhaps—nay, doubtless—Steven would take the opportunity of meeting her, which the royal function afforded him this night. She knew enough of the ways of Jerome's court already to be aware that there would be no difficulty in his being present at the palace concert should he wish it. The Upstart loved to parade his magnificence before strangers; and to a Waldorff-Kielmansegg the palace doors would be open *à double battants*.

But, search the throng as she might, there was no sign of the young disdainful head. The vision of it, pale and passionate, had lived in her memory even as she had seen it at their parting. He would have towered above these squat Westphalians, these popinjays of Frenchmen and Corsicans; his presence would have shone out among them. Nay, she would have marked his glance upon her among a thousand starers. She knew well, poor Sidonia, that she would have felt it in every leaping pulse! Her heart turned faint: had he cared, he would have come. Had he cared even only for her honour, according to those fine words of his yesterday, he must have been here to watch, to guard, his wife. She pressed her hands against her eyeballs, for the brilliancy of the lights became unbearable. And as she stood between the parted curtains in the recess, the orchestra, half hidden behind a bank of flowers, at the end of the room, struck up a gay French air which added to her sense of misery.

Her uncle's words, "the annulment deed is already drawn out," seemed to jig in her brain in time to the measure. It was almost the same phrase that she herself had flung at Steven—but now it bore a sound of cruel reality quite novel

to her. And when a couple of horns took up the fiddles' theme, they seemed to be blaring to the world her unutterable shame: "A quixotic piece of nonsense, half-hearted, soon repented ... at least, on one side.... Count Kielmansegg's signature will be quickly affixed...."

How was it possible for any one to be so abandoned, so helpless? Even the small furry things of the forest at home had their holes to which they could run and hide when they were hurt.... The forest at home! With what longing did her soul yearn to the thought of the green shelter, the pine-alleys with their long shadows cutting the yellow glades; of the great, sombre thickets, where not the most practised huntsman of the *Revier* could have tracked a startled hind.... Dawn in the woods, with pipe of birds waking up ... violets, blinking dew in the moss, and clean, tart breezes blowing free.... Eventide in the forest: the mild sun setting at the end of the valley, through the clearings, and the thrush chanting his last anthem on the topmost bough of the stone pine.... The scent of the wood-smoke from the forest house, where Forest-Mother Friedel was preparing supper for her hungry lads, where all was so wholesome, so honest, so homelike; where at this moment—who knows?—Geiger-Hans might be seated in the ingleglow, his music, lilt of joy and sorrow mingled, of humour and tenderness, floating out through the open door into the forest-aisle.... Sidonia's thoughts began to wander from her own sorrow. She saw the sunrise in the forest, she felt the evening peace.

All at once, in her lonely corner, she started and opened her eyes; she brushed her hands across her wet lips. She was dreaming, surely! And yet she could swear that the actual thrill of the vagabond's violin was in the air, that its piercing sweetness and incomparable depth of sound were ringing in her ears.

"*Allons voir danser la grande Jeanne....*" The orchestra was braying the trivial French tune no more. The jigging and twiddling of fiddles, the mock laughter of hautboys, the infectious rhythm of flute and drum, had all given place to a stealing melody, infinitely apart:—yes, even that mountain song which had been known between her and the wanderer as "Sidonia's air"! Surely if she were not dreaming, then she was mad!

She stood, holding her breath. The strain went on. Above those clamours of laughter and voices, yes, it was true ... her song, Sidonia's air, was calling her, unmistakable, insistent, with all the urgency of a whispered message.

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, she left her hiding-place and went swiftly through the indifferent throng towards the call. With one exception the men of the orchestra had left their platform: behind a high group of palms, a solitary musician plied his bow softly, secretly, as if rehearsing to himself.

Sidonia pushed some branches apart. The player looked up. Their eyes met. Then she forgot to be astonished. She thought she had known it all along. He had come to save her. True friend!

"I knew it was you," she said. She laughed at him through the green palm-stems, her eyes sparkled. How could she ever have thought Geiger-Hans would fail her? She had need of him, and of course he had come!

But Geiger-Hans did not smile back. His face—so dark under powdered hair, so odd over the mulberry uniform, bechained and besilvered, of Jerome's Court Orchestra—was very grave.

"Little Madam Sidonia," he said, "what are you doing here?" He spoke sadly; and under his unconscious fingers his violin gave a sad accompaniment to the words.

Sidonia looked at him with her innocent gaze. She was hurt that he should find fault with her—the Geiger-Onkel who hitherto had always thought all she did perfect! Yet she was pleased that he should dub her "madam" instead of the whilom "mamzell."

"Do you know what sort of a place this is?" pursued the fiddler, with ever-increasing severity. "Do you know with what people you are surrounded? Have you not heard the common saying, that if it be doubtful whether an honest woman—save the unhappy Queen—ever crossed these palace doors, to a certainty no honest woman ever went forth from them? Why are you not with your husband?—with your husband," he repeated sharply.

Sidonia, who had hung her head, ashamed—for in truth she felt the evil about her in every fibre—reared it on the last words.

"Geiger-Onkel," she cried, "I have no husband, and you know it. That is past and done with." Then her heart began to beat very fast and the smarting tears gathered in her eyes. "From what motives I was married, I know not; but that it was all a cheat, I do know. He does not want me. He never cared for me. First it was pity, perhaps, I think; now it is pride with him. On such terms I will be no man's wife. I will have none of it—rather death!"

"Oh, death!" said the fiddler, and struck his strings, "death is the least of evils. Nay, the release of a clean, proud soul ... that is joy. The worst end of life is not death. Beware, little madam!" He had another change of tone: never had Sidonia been rated with such sternness. "Why, what a child you are! Yet none so childish but that you know full well this is no child's mischief, but woman's danger! With what anxiety am I here to save you from yourself; at what trouble! ... Only that the rats are flying already from the falling house; only that I happened to meet the second violin of Jerome's orchestra, an acquaintance of old—a musical rat in full scuttle!—I might still be racking my brains for means to come near you! Here am I this hour, wearing the livery of the Upstart, not knowing if I shall be given the necessary minute for speech. The prisons are stuffed full to-night, and Jerome always was afraid of me. Let but his eye, or that of his spies, turn this way and recognize me, and it is to the lock-up with Geiger-Hans! Oh,

then, what of Madam Sidonia? Home to your husband! Home, I say! You know where to find him. You toss your head at me? It was through pride the angel fell—and he was Star of the Morning!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Sidonia.

"Nay," said Geiger-Hans; "you know too much already. Fie, what a dance will there be here before the house falls! Even now Jerome is plotting his last gratification. Did not his eye fall upon you? Your husband's name, his sacred Austrian nationality—that is your only safeguard. And that name you are not to keep long. You are to become Madame d'Albignac."

"D'Albignac!" cried Sidonia. "I—Madame d'Albignac? You are mad, Geiger-Onkel!"

But, even as she spoke, she felt a cold sweat upon her.

"And d'Albignac will not be for a long engagement," pursued the fiddler, relentlessly. "The puppet King has very little time left, as his lieutenant knows, and he, d'Albignac, will be but too eager to save something out of the ruins—and, besides, they are amicably agreed already."

"I don't understand," said Sidonia again. She went white, then red, trembled, and caught at the prickly stem of the palm.

"Take me away with you," she broke out of a sudden, piteously. "Save me!"

"I cannot save you," answered the wanderer. His voice was harsh, yet it faltered. "No one can save you but your husband. Go home to him."

Then he began to tune his fiddle with fury, for his fellow-players were straggling back. Some of them looked curiously at the fine lady who was speaking to their unknown comrade so familiarly. Sidonia turned. Many of the great company were looking at her, too. Right across the room she saw Jerome and his equerry talking together; and, as they talked, their eyes (or so she fancied) ever and anon sought her.

Panic seized her. But, even in panic, Sidonia was loyal. She must not speak again to Geiger-Hans, lest she bring him into deeper danger. Geiger-Hans her friend, the wild wanderer, in prison! In prison for her! That would be terrible.

She wheeled round; and then, like a hunted thing, pushed her way blindly through the throng, determined to retire to the Burgravine's apartment. People nudged each other as she passed. At the door, an old lady, with white hair and a soft, pink-and-white face, detained her by the skirt:

"Who are you, my dear, and whither so fast?"

"Oh, please," panted the girl, "let me go! I am Sidonia of Kielmansegg." Even in her agitation she did not forget the name that was her shield. "I must go back to my aunt, the Burgravine of Wellenshausen."

The old lady nodded. "That is all right," she said. "But you seem frightened, child. There is nothing to be frightened at. And if you want any advice, my dear,

or help, you have only to ask for *Madame la Grande Maréchale de la Cour*—that is myself. I am very fond of girls."

Her voice was purring, her smile was comfortable. As Sidonia moved away, she felt vaguely reassured. If her own kindred failed her, there might yet be salvation—salvation other than the inadmissible humiliation of that return to the man she loved but who did not love her ... all that Geiger-Hans (so suddenly, unaccountably unkind!) would devise for her.

In the Chancellor's apartment she found bustle and confusion. A footman staggered past her, bringing in trunks. A couple of the new Cassel maids were running to and fro with folded packets of lace and silk.

For a second Sidonia stared amazed; then her heart leaped with sudden joy. These preparations for departure could have but one significance: the Chancellor had got wind of the infamous plot against his niece, ... by his orders Betty was already preparing to take her into safety. Ah, how could she have doubted her kinsman's sense of family honour? Had not even his desperate intention, in the matter of the *oubliette*, shown him a true Wellenshausen? She had ceased to blame him since she had understood: rather slay than be dishonoured! Cassel was no place for honest women; in his decision to keep his wife away from it, he had been right, a thousand times! And who, better than Sidonia, knew how his hand had been forced before he consented to bring them thither? But, in this emergency, he would be master once more—and she was safe.

She burst into the room: yes, there was her aunt, already engaged in donning a travelling garb, and ever and anon clapping jewels into their cases with fervid haste. Betty looked up and her olive face grew thunder-dark as she recognized her niece.

"Geiger-Hans has told me all!" cried the-girl from the door. "Did you look for me? How horrible it all is. But I shall be ready in a minute! Where are we going?"

The Burgravine was silent for a second, fixing her with cold eyes. Then she spoke, with an acid composure:

"*I* am going back to Austria. I have done with Westphalia and all that belongs to it. I do not know what your plans may be, but they concern me no longer."

She closed the case she held in her hand; the snap seemed to give final emphasis to her words. Sidonia stood, aghast.

"I have done with your Westphalia, my love," pursued the Burgravine: "done with your uncle, my Bluebeard, *en premier lieu*, and with Jerome, that plebeian, that upstart!"

Intense was the scorn with which she spoke the words.

Apart from this, the irredeemable wound that her vanity had received to-

night from the "little Corsican," Betty had another reason for her sudden determination. Flighty she might be, but she was a woman of business instincts where her self-esteem was concerned. She had met a countryman of hers at the concert, an elderly diplomat, a man of standing. He had breathed certain information into her little ear.... He had received a courier. Napoleon had been finally vanquished at Leipzig. The news had not yet reached Jerome, but it spelt "the End" this time! Himself intended to take the high-road, *sans tambour ni trompette*, the very next morning. He was getting on in years, and he would prefer not to be caught in the *débandade*. And, as he had parted from her, he had pressed her hand, and discreetly trusted that she might soon be paying her relatives in Vienna a visit, and that they might meet again there.

The obvious hint had not been wasted. Excellent M. de Puffendorff—he would be toiling his elderly, quiet way homewards by the next sunshine. What was to keep Betty from starting that very night? The Burgrave had put it out of his own power to resent anything she did. And, whatever should betide between them, she was sure of a comfortable pension. To leave at once was certainly her best course, since this ludicrous Cassel had nothing to offer her but the discomfort of a *révolution pour rire*. To be involved in the stampede of the Westphalian court would for ever cover her with ridicule. She shuddered as she thought of her escape from the unpardonable absurdity, from the madness she had actually contemplated—a *liaison* with M. Jérome Buonaparte!

As for Wellenshausen, the horses were not foaled (she swore) that would take her back to that prison. It was hey for Vienna this time, and in earnest!

She laughed out loud now, as her eye rested upon Sidonia's bewildered face. Here, in sooth, was Fate avenging her with unexpected completeness.

"Fortunately, I have my own people to go to," she remarked airily. "You will, I think, see pretty things before long in your Cassel. But, there, you have a feeling heart, my dear. You can wipe your little monarch's tears first, and make up to M. d'Albignac for the loss of his pension afterwards. *C'est un beau rôle*, and you have your uncle's blessing upon it."

D'Albignac again! An odious, open threat. Yet, though it inspired horror, Sidonia scarcely felt fear of its execution. No one could force her into such a marriage. But the other allusion, because of its very mystery, brought the former anguished sense of approaching evil upon the girl; a dread of something unspeakable, and so secret that she knew not where it might lurk for her, or at what moment it might seize her.

"You are a wicked woman," she said, dropping her words slowly.

Betty laughed. In the forcing-house atmosphere of Jerome's mock Versailles, it had not required long for the flowers of Betty's nature to develop in strange luxuriance.

"*Ecoutez, ma chère*," said she, brazen, "the only act of virtue I ever perpetrated (and, by the way, you were my instrument in it) I have regretted ever since. Bah! the *oubliette* would have opened its old jaws in vain, for Kielmansegg and I would have been far away, on the wings of love, before my amiable husband had had time to set the ancient machinery in motion. Of course you stood haranguing each other, for poor Steven could not believe that I meant to fail him. Anyhow," pursued the speaker, with her inimitable logic, "there is no reason why I should have been killed any more than you. I suppose Steven could have nursed me in his arms all night as safely as he did you. (Poor boy, it might have made the time seem shorter to him.) So much for virtue.... How you stare, my love! It is one comfort that to repent of being good is so much easier than to repent of being wicked—and so much more successful, as a rule! My journey back to Vienna has only been postponed, you see."

Countess Kielmansegg stood stonily. The Burgravine, running from place to place like a mouse, halted now in the middle of the room. Their eyes met, and their thoughts flashed at each other.

"And do you go alone?" asked Sidonia.

In her own ears her voice sounded strange; her heart was gripped as by iron fingers. Oh, if Betty would only not laugh like that!

The Burgravine suddenly ceased laughing. An idea had struck her. Why should she go alone, indeed, if there was a chance of the excellent company of a well-favoured, rich, and noble youth? What a magnificent culmination to her dull career as Burgravine von Wellenshausen! And what a double vengeance! It seemed as if it must have been predestined, so perfect was it. It was worth trying for; and, at any rate, the pleasure of tormenting Sidonia was worth a fib or two. Betty laughed again.

"Who knows?" she answered. "I may perchance find an escort. Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg will have signed by now a certain precious document of yours, which I hear they bring him to-night. Then it will be '*Hop-la, postilion!*' with him also, I suppose.—He is my cousin," giggled pretty Betty. "So, if I accept his protection, it will be perfectly right and proper."

Sidonia gave a quiver like a startled hind. Then she turned and fled, even as flies the hind with the hunt on her traces, and Betty's laugh pursued her like to the note of the horn.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A TREACHEROUS HAVEN

"While some, whose souls the old serpent long had drawn
Down ... hissed each at other's ear
What shall not be recorded—women they,
Women, or what had been those gracious things...."
(*Geraint and Enid*).

She ran headlong down the passage, and struck against the burly figure of the Burgrave himself. The omen of trunks had not yet met him. He was in high good humour. Indeed, he was of those that have no scent for omens. His kinglet, but now, had promised him, for no special reason that appeared yet, territorial honour and rich regard, and he had no doubt of the royal power.

"Whither so fast, my maid?" he inquired, holding her not unkindly.

She clung to him with passion: "O, Uncle Ludo, take me away from this place! Take me away to-night, this hour, at once! Let us go back to the dear old Burg!"

"Why, what is this?" He pushed her from him, good-humoured, bantering, fuddled with the royal Sillery. His sovereign and he had pledged a bumper to the heiress of Wellenshausen's altered prospects. "Na, na," said the Burgrave, and wagged his head jocosely. "Somebody would not be in such a hurry to run away if somebody knew what her old uncle had planned for her. Ha, my dear, that hasty marriage was never more to my liking than to yours; and now we have a new husband for you. Aye, and a place at court! Hey, little Sidonia! Such a fine husband, such a fine position!"

The girl raised her eyes and desperately scanned his empurpled countenance. Again the Burgrave archly shook his head, and laughter rumbled in his huge body.—Aye, aye, it was the way of women to feign coyness, but men knew what was good for them. One must humour them from time to time, but never yield.—She read something implacable in the stupidity of his eye. She thought of the old wild boars in the forest: as well might she try to appeal to one of those!

He clutched her hands in his hot grasp; a faintness came over her.

"Aunt Betty is packing," she cried wildly, inspired by woman's wit. "Don't you know? ... She is going back to Austria."

"What?" roared the Burgrave. He released her and cantered sidelong down the passage to Betty's room.

It was blow upon blow. Sidonia stood, trying to collect her scattered thoughts. Suddenly Eliza came upon her, tripping from the outer door upon

gay sandalled foot. She flung her shawl from her head at sight of Sidonia, and her eyes danced under dishevelled curls.

"We are going to Vienna, mademoiselle," she announced breathlessly, "and no later than to-night. I have just ordered the post-chaise for madame. One cannot trust that Kurtz. It is a great secret. Will not mademoiselle come with us? One is so happy at Vienna! And mademoiselle will probably meet the young count quite easily there—or somebody else just as handsome," added Eliza. Her eyes rollicked.

Sidonia looked at the gleeful, unscrupulous, excited face and recoiled. Wine flowed as freely in the menials' hall, on fête nights, at the Palace of Bellevue as in the salons. And Eliza was one who would profit of the occasion. But now the Burgrave's voice rose from the inner room with sudden clangour. The maid, suddenly sobered, caught Sidonia's wrist.

"Ah, *ciel*," she cried, "what is passing within there? And we, who thought monsieur safe away, in attendance of the King! ... Why, mademoiselle, how white you are, and how you tremble!" Immoral she might be, like her mistress; but, unlike her, she was kind. "Ah, he was not there, then, to-night," she proceeded with rapid intuition. "Listen, Mademoiselle Sidonia, since he won't come, if I were you I should just go to him.... And quick, quick, before he signs. He can't turn you away ... even if he wanted it. *Sapristi*, but you are still his wife."

A fresh outburst of wrangling voices in Betty's rooms here drew her curiosity in another direction.

"I must go and be with poor madame," she exclaimed; the twinkle in her eye, over the delight of witnessing the marital scene, contrasted oddly with the pious devotion of her tone.

"*Tu verras que cela va rater encore cette fois*," she was telling herself philosophically, as she hurried away.

"If you want help," had said the soft-voiced old lady, "ask for *la Grande Maréchale de la Cour*." If ever a poor daughter of Eve wanted help, it was surely Sidonia, standing between the Scylla of nameless evil and the Charybdis of dire humiliation.

A refuge for the night, the loan of a small sum, to enable her to gain the Forest House—for Sidonia was still kept like a child and had no purse of her own—surely, it was small assistance that she required. She paused but to catch up a travelling cloak in her room; then, seeking the outer corridor again, bade the first valet on her way guide her to the apartment of Madame la Grande Maréchale. She would wait, she planned, for the great lady's return from festivity. There must be safety where such gentle old age presided; and good counsel; perchance even

an escort, forthcoming on the morrow for her journey back to the Thuringian forest.

The Maréchale's apartments were on the ground floor, and Sidonia thought fortune favoured her when the porter informed her that "Her Excellency" herself had that instant entered. Still more at ease felt she when the pretty old lady received her with open arms and cooing words of welcome:

"*Ma belle enfant*, this is well! I had presentiments. I expected you. That great bear of a Chancellor, your uncle, and the little minx of a wife he has ... (linnet-head, wasp-temper, ferret-heart—I know the kind! One look at her, *ma chère*, it was enough): that was no place for you. Nay, you wanted a friend, and it is well you came to me, very well." She nodded; and the bird-of-paradise plume in her gauzy turban quivered over her white curls.

Sidonia had to struggle with rising tears; but they were tears of gratitude, of relief. Madame la Maréchale patted her on the shoulder, stooped to embrace her; there was about her a delicate atmosphere of Parma powder and amber-scented laces.

"It is good, my child," she murmured, "to have a friend at court—some one who knows the ways of it. *Ma petite*, you and I, we'll do great things together! Nay, but we will talk no more now. A little supper would not come amiss. Hey, what have you eaten to-day?"

She rang a silver bell, and a smart *soubrette* appeared, who stared with bold, black eyes at the visitor.

"Bettine, my good girl," said the suave lady, "take ... mademoiselle into my chamber, and arrange me her coiffure before supper.—We must be beautiful," she added, turning pleasantly again to Sidonia, "for we may have a guest."

"This way, mademoiselle," said Bettine, briefly.

As she led Sidonia across the threshold of a violet-scented, violet-hued bower, the lady's dulcet tones called after her—

"And then, Bettine, return to me here. I have to speed thee with a little note."

"It is well, madame," answered the French girl. (There was no "fashion" in Westphalia without Gallic handmaids.)

Sidonia looked around, and then at the girl's hard face as she closed the door. It seemed to her as if a bog quivered under her feet where she had thought to find firm footing. Her ears had been first disagreeably struck by the word "mademoiselle," and the emphasis that the old lady had placed on it. *Mademoiselle!*—to her who had so clearly introduced herself as the wife of Count Kielmansegg. The reference to an expected visitor next filled her with inchoate suspicion, which the order concerning a note intensified. She now read an insolent meaning in Bettine's eyes as they appraised her.

"Whom does your mistress expect to supper?" she asked, with sharpness.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Madame la Maréchale's supper-parties are very amusing," she replied familiarly in her fluent but strangely accented German. "Little suppers—very amusing, very discreet. Mademoiselle will amuse herself to-night ... oh, she may be sure she will amuse herself *royally*!" She paused on the word with an odious smile, then pursued familiarly: "The great thing is that mademoiselle should be beautiful. Voyons, we must off with this cloak. Will mademoiselle sit down? Oh, how lovely is mademoiselle's figure! but her hair—mademoiselle forgives?—her hair done in despite of all sense!"

Sidonia had felt it before she had the certainty into what a trap she had walked. Now she knew; and with the clearness of her conviction, she also knew what she had to do. She sat down silently, as bidden; and, while the distasteful touch of the Maréchale's maid played in her hair, made a steady inventory of the room. There was no door but the one leading back into the boudoir; great windows were curtained away behind the dressing-table.

"Oh, how much better is mademoiselle like this!" cried Bettine, falling back to admire her work.

Sidonia gave her own reflection an anxious scrutiny. One word, one look, one sign of weakness, and her hastily formed plan might be frustrated.... Beyond that possibility was the horror upon which she could not look, ... upon which she would never look! For, at the worst, there was still a refuge. The fiddler's words—"The release of a clean, proud soul—that is joy!" came to her ever and again as upon a strain of his own music, and ever with fresh strength and comfort.

"Oh, how beautiful is mademoiselle!" cried Bettine again, this time with genuine enthusiasm. "Positively, it is flames she has in her glance, and no rouge could beat me the colour of those cheeks."

"Bettine...!" rose the Maréchale's silver voice from the next room; and Sidonia, flinging herself into her part with the instinct of the defenceless, smiled gaily on the girl as she bade her go.

"Mademoiselle will not forget 'tis I who has adorned her—when she is in power?" insinuated the Maréchale's maid.

"I shall not forget," said Sidonia between her teeth. She seized the handle of the door as it closed between them: fortunately the Maréchale liked discreet hinges, and Sidonia was able, noiselessly, to draw it the necessary fraction of an inch apart that she might listen. There was not a tremor in her hands; she held her breath lest a rustle of silk should betray her. The strong spirit rises to the great situation.

There was whispering within. The ear of the heiress of Wellenshausen had been trained in forest glades, full of the small sounds of lesser lives. She caught a word here, a word there.

"... The note ... in his Majesty's own hands.... Thou hast well understood, my girl?"

"Yes, Excellence."

Bettine's whisper carried far. But now the Maréchale made a softer communication, of which the listener could gather no import, but Bettine's answer again gave the dreadful clue. It was emitted with a laugh. "Oh, no; your Excellency is wrong—we are not so scared as all that, believe me!"

A dulcet titter joined the note of the servant's mirth.

"At any rate, the little bird is in the cage," said the Maréchale, as she laughed.

It was more than enough. Sidonia closed the door. She found a bolt which moved willingly under her fingers. Then a frenzy of haste came upon her. The cloak over her pale dress—the hood over Bettine's fine coiffure! And now the window! People who shut up a little bird in a cage should make sure that the bars are close enough to keep it safe; for the bird has wings, and its heart beats towards freedom, towards the mate, towards the nest! The Maréchale's apartments were on the *rez-de-chaussée*; but had they been on the top-most floor, that window would yet have been the way of Sidonia's flight.

Oh, how deliriously the chill, pure air beat upon her face after that evil hothouse atmosphere! By the stillness and the fragrance, by the soft earth under her feet, she knew she had alighted into the palace garden. It was a murky night, and the rain was falling; the distant lights of the park gates glimmered fitfully.

Sidonia had no idea whither to turn; but the intention of her heart was undeviating as the flight of the homing bird. There was only one refuge for her, only one place for her—her husband's arms. Her road was clear: she was going to Steven, and, after that, nothing would ever matter again.

She set off running in the direction of the gateway lamps. In a minute her light ball-slippers were soaked with wet, clogged with mud; her narrow skirts clung against her silk stockings; now she brushed against low bushes, now nearly fell. She could run no more; she must grope her way.

But presently her eyes became more accustomed to the dimness. A double row of marble statues, mounting ghostly guard on each side of the great alley, showed white through the trees. She knew her bearings now. Yonder fantastic group of lights in front was the Orangerie, illumined in honour of the royal fête. Fortunately for her, the skies to-night were not such as to tempt guests to al fresco rambling. Further, to the left, twinkled the lamps of the town, reflected through the branches in the waters of the Kleine-Fulda, which ran parallel to the Avenue, as she knew.

From the Friedrichsthor—the great gate of the palace grounds—came distant sounds of voices, laughter and calls. Through that issue she dared hardly venture. Even as she stood, hesitating, the rumble of an approaching carriage

grew out of the night. She turned and fled in the opposite direction—there must be minor exits from the park, surely, and, so long as she was within the precincts of the palace, terror would dog her steps.

Her feet once on the firm sand of the alley, she girded up her impeding skirts. The dim stone figures on each side seemed, to her excited fancy, to move their heads and bend over to stare in wonder, to bid her haste away, wise in old knowledge of the guilty secrets of such a court. Somehow, these silent figures were company to her and she missed their presence when she plunged into the first turning which, she trusted, would lead towards the town. Yet, the darkness of the trees closing about her brought a new sense of protection. She was not of those who feel the night-horror of the woods; the trees were her friends from childhood; they knew her and she them. The softness and damp smell of the autumn leaves beneath her tread were grateful to her senses. The sound of the Kleine-Fulda on her stony bed guided her way to a narrow Chinese bridge over the ribbon of water. Soon she had to advance more slowly once again and feel her way: here the ground began to ascend, the trees to give place to shrubs; the path doubled and twisted suddenly. A blank wall sprang at her out of the gloom. She drew a quick breath. An illumined window-pane blinked:—it was the hoped-for gate of her escape, could she now but elude the sentry's challenge or carry herself with such assurance as to be allowed a passage.

But in Jerome's kingdom it was the unexpected that usually happened. By the gate stood, indeed, the inevitable sentry-box; but as, with her heart beating in her throat, Sidonia approached tiptoe with endless precautions, behold, it was empty! The gate itself was open. From within the guardian's lodge, behind that blinking window, came a merry burst of song and laughter. Clearly it was "like master like man." If Jerome thought that the enjoyment of the hour was the most urgent business of existence, so did his servants, including his park sentries. There was no doubt of the wholeheartedness of the entertainment in the side lodge of the royal garden that night.

CHAPTER XXIX
THE HOMING BIRD

"Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee...."

(*The Taming of the Shrew*).

The street into which she stepped was ill-lighted, and contained but a few poor houses facing the park walls. It seemed to lead downwards to the open country and upwards to the heart of the town.

Lifting her torn and draggled skirts as neatly as she could, and pulling the folds of her hood and cloak more closely about her, she started with decision on the upward way. Here she must go sedately, though the hammering of her own pulses seemed like the footsteps of pursuers and a mad impulse, ever and anon, seized her to run. The gloom of the park had been infinitely less terrible than the town with its staring belated wayfarers, its circles of light under the hanging oil lamps, its nauseous strips of darkness where the miserable houses seemed to touch each other above her head, and where gutters mingled in noisomeness down the middle of the street. She looked back on the solitude, with its clean pine breath, as a haven of shelter. But she tramped unfalteringly the maze of dirty streets, only pausing twice to inquire the way.

The first time she was kindly answered by the poor faded woman she had stopped.... The Hôtel de l'Aigle Impérial was in the Koenig's Platz. To reach it one must take to the left, then to the right, till one crossed the Friedrich's Platz; then, keeping along the Obere Koenig's Gasse, one would find herself by the Hotel.... The woman wrapped her thin shawl closer about her shoulders, smiled vaguely in response to Sidonia's thanks and sped on—God knows to what miserable home. Trying to follow her instructions, Sidonia, chilled, fatigued and bewildered, soon began to doubt again, and requested the help of the next reputable-looking being of her sex on her path. This was a stout, red-faced dame, followed by a serving wench with a lantern; some excellent business woman on the way to fetch her man from the beerhouse, doubtless. She measured Sidonia from head to foot, caught the gleam of the muddied satin of her skirts, of the pearls at her throat, and suddenly, instead of replying to the meek question, began to rate her in round dialect for a trollop and a strumpet: "*Du, mein Jott*, and she so young, too!"

Most of the epithets were meaningless to Sidonia; but voice and eye were not. And when the virtuous dame proceeded to threats of night-watch and lock-up, the girl fairly took to her heels and ran blindly.

When labouring heart and panting lungs forced a halt upon her, she found herself in the very region of her seeking. By the wide space around her, the better lighting, the statue dominating in the centre of the tree-planted square, this could be no other than the Friedrich's Platz. But even as she paused to draw a quieter breath, before proceeding again, a new alarm was upon her.

Reeling as they advanced, linked together arm in arm, roaring out a chorus,

the real tune of which was a matter of conjecture, three fantastic figures turned into the square from a side street, and suddenly confronted her. Students they were proclaimed in every long lock of hair, every extravagant item of attire; in the high boots and the spurs, the scarves, the clanking rapiers.

The Platz, with its staid burgherlike respectability, was filled with tipsy clamour. Judging by the colours profusely displayed and the bellowed words of the chorus, a bellicose patriotism was the night's inspiration. But, not content with wine-jug and harmony, the singers were not proof against lighter relaxation, as became evident upon their catching sight of the girl under the shadow of the trees.

"A prize, a prize!" shouted he who seemed to be the leader of the three, a red-headed Hercules. He took a lurching run in front of his companions, seized Sidonia playfully by the shoulders, and pulled her under the light of the nearest lamp.

The furious gesture with which she flung him off revealed again the ill-timed splendour of her attire. For a moment the three students stood staring open-mouthed. Then he who seemed the soberest of the party—he had a sleek impertinent face and an air of jocose solemnity—broke into cackling laughter:

"Positively, a bird from the tyrant's aviary," he cried. "A foreign, French bird! By all the laws of civilized warfare, a prize of the captor! ... Matam!" he pursued; in a vile French, bowed extravagantly, seized Sidonia's hand and tucked it against his side. "Matam, fly to the guardianship of the Law."

"Nay, take refuge within the bosom of the Church," interrupted the third, intoning the words: "Raise your glances heavenwards!" He shot out a black arm and lifted her chin with two dank fingers reeking of canaster.

Sidonia, who had been paralyzed with fright and the sense of her own helplessness, here once more struck herself free—this time with a wild cry for the watch. Her cry was answered by shouts and cat-calls; and now, with a mighty clatter of spurred boots, a fresh detachment of *Studiosi* joined the advance party. As in a nightmare, Sidonia found herself the centre of a struggling drunken laughing babel, which presently resolved itself into a circle that wheeled, stamping and jingling in time to a ribald chorus.

One of the dancers suddenly broke the ring; a flaring bearded face was thrust forward.

"A kiss, matamazell, and long live Westphalia!"

At this last insult the terror of the girl gave place to overpowering anger. She struck the coarse face so valiant a blow with her open palm, that, already none too steadily balanced, the red-haired giant staggered and would have fallen but for an officious comrade. A howl of laughter rose from the rest of the gang.

But as Sidonia, tossing back her hood, broke into vigorous German, silence

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succeeded to clamour. The sight of that head, so extraordinarily young, so golden in the lamp-shine, struck the group with overwhelming surprise. And upon surprise came shame, as the meaning of the words that fell indignantly from Sidonia's lips, pierced to the fuddled brains. Wild, dissipated boys they were, but not vicious at the core of their German hearts.

Here was a girl, a lady—more, a country-woman of their own; and, in their own tongue, she was telling them what she thought of them. She had always been so proud of being a German, and now she was ashamed, ashamed to think that Germans could so behave to a woman! Students, too, "nobles of learning," patriots, they called themselves, and to offer such a spectacle to the *Welsch*! She had fled from the palace down there because she had thought it not the right place for a good German woman: now she knew she would have been safer among the French....

Here a groan escaped a youth less tipsy or more susceptible than the rest, the quickest at any rate to catch the galling significance of this reproach. It was echoed here and there from the listening circle, by sounds of remorse and dismay. The ring melted apart; one or two caps were lifted, there was a shuffling of feet, as the most abashed slunk away. She stood, a flaming spot on each cheek, head held high, still flashing scorn and fury upon the remainder, when, with the perpetual irony of fate, the help that would have been so valuable to her a few minutes ago, and now unneeded, arrived upon the scene.

A burly watchman, bearing a lantern in one hand, and in the other a halbert with which he struck the pavement at rhythmic intervals, came striding upon them.

"Come, sirs, come, sirs, this is no manner of behaviour! No scandal in the streets, I beg. Honest folk should be in bed this hour! Disperse, disperse, *meine Herren*! And as for the *Mädel* there——"

He flung the light upon Sidonia's face and stopped, he also astounded. But she had caught in his words the music of a well-beloved and familiar accent.

"*Ach, Gott, Freund!*" she cried, in his own speech, flinging out both hands towards him, "do you come from my Thuringia? Then I am safe! By these Westphalians to-night, I, an unprotected woman, have been cruelly insulted."

Thuringian wits are not specially quick; but Thuringian hearts are sound, as Sidonia knew, and the appeal of the home language went straight to the watchman's. He flung himself before the girl, and turned threateningly upon her molesters, raising his halbert in a fashion which in any other circumstances would have been fiercely resented by students as against their academic privileges.

But to-night the situation was hardly one that admitted of academic haughtiness. The over-cheerful band scattered like night birds, here and there a shamefaced youth lifting his ridiculous head-gear before vanishing.

Sidonia and her countryman were alone. Then he, a stout veteran, grey-whiskered, with a comfortable fatherly presence, turned a shrewd, kind, yet grave scrutiny upon her:

"Na, child!" he exclaimed; "and what, in the name of God, brings you in the streets at this hour?"

She told him the bare truth, down to her name: how she had left the palace to seek the protection of her husband, who was at an inn in the town.

The old man nodded two or three times comprehendingly. He knew the Chancellor, as small people know the great; knew Wellenshausen, as who did not know the noble name on the marches of Thuringia; knew that a Thuringian lady was wise to leave that place yonder—with a jerk of his lantern. But why came she apart from her husband at all—how had he left her there?

"It was against his will; but I was angry with him," said Sidonia, ingenuously. She looked up at the old face, like a child, and tears welled into her eyes.

The good man gave a chuckle. A great lady was the daughter of Wellenshausen, the greatest lady in his own country; but to him, in very truth, to-night only a foolish child under his guardianship. He shook his head at her and began to chide in homely fashion.

Aye, aye, it was very wrong for a woman to disobey her husband. All good German women were submissive to their lords. Now she saw what dangers surrounded rebellious wives! She was right to go back to him. She must be humble and ask forgiveness. Aye, aye, he would guide her to the hotel door. Certainly! Was it likely indeed that he would leave her till he had seen her safe within?

He shifted his lantern into the hand that held the halbert, and gladly Sidonia felt his rough fingers close on her wrist. She went beside him, weak now and shaken, and listened in meekness to his homily. By-and-by, finding her in such good disposition, he endeavoured to beguile the way with more general topics. The Thuringian dialect became broader and broader as he foretold the clean-out of honest Germany from the *Welsch* intruders; the downfall of the monkey tyrant, and the approaching good days when true-minded folk would come by their own again in Westphalia. Eh, it would not be long, he added mysteriously. Na, he knew what he knew. It was a good thing she was out of the French palace, for more reasons than one—aye, aye.

Sidonia could have cried for joy when, emerging upon the little round Koenig's Platz, she saw the gilt eagle, illumined by a red lamp, shine out in sanguinary grandeur from the front of the old German house. On the doorstep she once again offered both her hands to the watchman; he shook them cordially.

"Thank you, thank you!" she said. "Oh, I wish I had something to give you to remember me by! ... I have not any money." She made a hesitating gesture

towards a ring on her finger. He interrupted her:

"Let that alone, child—I shall not forget you. Good night ... and be good!"

He knocked for her; stood firmly planted on the pavement, watching her entrance and smiling into his whiskers.

* * * * *

"I am the Countess Kielmansegg," said Sidonia to the sleepy porter. "Show me to the count's room."

Her tone was imperious. The man stared sullenly a moment, then swallowed a yawn; he had but just been roused from a comfortable nap to take up the night work, and the only perception awake in him was an acute sense of injury. Without a word, he turned and led the way up the square, dark stairs to the second floor. Before Steven's door his slouch came to a halt; he lifted a hand to knock, but she arrested him.

"Is that the room? You may go," she said.

She waited till his heavy foot had tramped the whole downward way, then, with a sudden overwhelming feeling that if she hesitated now her courage would after all fail her, she turned the handle of the door and went quickly in.

The room was deserted. As she realized this, Sidonia's heart seemed to empty itself of the hopes, the yearnings, even the terror, which had so filled it these last hours. All became a blank, a void. Never for a moment had she contemplated the possibility of Steven's absence. She closed the door and sank dully on the first chair. Presently the sense of shelter, the warmth about her, the serenity of the silence and solitude, began to soothe her into comfort. She lifted her head and looked around. The room was lighted by an oil lamp on the table; fire was lapping in the china stove; sundry chattels of Steven's were scattered about; his valise gaped, still open, in a corner. No fear, then, but that he would return to-night.

The vague fragrance of the lavender scent he liked brought his presence suddenly and vividly to her. The little bride melted into tears. She was worn out; her aching feet stung her as she held them against the warm porcelain of the stove. Her whole being seemed melted, her spirit broken; but there was a balm sweeter than triumph in this hour of her woman's surrender. All Betty's words, her gibes and threats, even what had seemed to be actual proofs of Steven's deceit, passed from her mind, as if washed away by these healing tears. There are moments when the soul can see beyond facts.

Presently, in the general relaxation of mind and body, the exhaustion consequent on the fatigues and emotions of the day overcame her. She sank into vague brief sleeps, to awake, her heart beating in her throat with reminiscences

of past alarms. Thus she started at length from a vivid dream that the Burgrave, Betty, d'Albignac and Jerome had tracked her and were carrying her back to the palace. She came to full consciousness of solitude, but could not still the wild fear at her heart.... Betty's cunning was as a sleuth-hound's—Betty would well know where to trace her.... Sidonia had given her name to the porter. It would be bootless to lock the door, for one thrust of the Burgrave's shoulder would dispose of sounder defences. They would be dragging her away; Steven would return and never know! ... She rose, shaking in every limb, and looked desperately round.

Then a thought sprang into her brain, quaint and childish, yet to her an inspiration of angels. The great old German bed in the alcove was hung with curtains; she would creep into its shelter and draw the yellow damask folds close around her. There would she be safe as a bird in her nest in the leaves—in a room within a room. And, hidden, she could listen for her husband's step.

CHAPTER XXX

DAWN MUSIC

"Wir fuhren allein im dunkeln
Postwagen die ganze nacht;
Wir ruhten einander am Herzen,
Wir haben gescherzt und gelacht...
Doch als es morgen tagte,
Mein kind, wie staunten wir!
Denn zwischen uns sass Amor,
Der blinde Passagier...."

HEINE.

The previous day, after his interview with Sidonia, Steven had spent most of his time searching for the fiddler. At first he had hunted for him, on the impulse of his anger, more for the mere relief of upbraiding him and of railing to some one upon the perversity of his bride, than for the sake of counsel. But later, as temper gave place to more serious thought, and the young man's better nature asserted itself, he longed for his friend that he might discuss with him the means of meeting this most untoward trick of fate, of safeguarding the headstrong child

they both loved from the danger of her surroundings.

It was chiefly the old quarters of the town that saw his disconsolate roaming. There was not a homely wine-garden, not a poor beer-house, where he did not stop and inquire. Had he been in the mood to notice such things, he might have been struck by the strange atmosphere of ferment brooding everywhere, especially in the purlieus beyond the river. There was a buzz about Cassel, like the hum of the swarming hive; as yet inarticulate, but ominous of wrath. It was perhaps, however, this very unconsciousness that preserved him from some danger on his vain quest. Once or twice he was followed; in most places he was looked at askance. One truculent host met his question with another: what did he want of Geiger-Hans? But the simplicity of the answer disarmed suspicion:

"He is my friend; I want his help."

The master of "The Great Tun" became immediately pleasant and conversational.—No, Geiger-Hans had not been about here for many weeks, more was the pity; he was wanted.

Disheartened and tired out, at last Steven returned to his hotel; but not to rest. He indited a letter to the Burgrave, demanding his wife in the name of the law of every country, and ending up with a scarcely veiled threat as to his power of making himself unpleasant to the Lord of Wellenshausen. Then, after having devoted some special attention to his attire, he again sought the palace gates. When he had left his letter with the porter, together with a gratuity so noble that it could not fail to buy the promptitude of delivery he desired, he demanded audience of one of the chamberlains.

On receipt of the fine coroneted card, the distinguished traveller was courteously entertained by Jerome's official, who volunteered to send him a formal invitation to the court concert on the morrow. Steven accepted with alacrity, and the urbane chamberlain further promised personally to introduce Count Waldorff-Kielmansegg to his royal master on the occasion. They parted with civilities on both sides, and Steven, feeling that the way was unexpectedly smoothed before him, passed the evening in more cheerful mood. Some instinct, rather than any set reason, had kept him from mentioning his connection with the Lord of Wellenshausen.

The next day he had the trivial, yet by no means easy, task to accomplish of procuring fitting garments for a court function. A misgiving at the non-appearance of the promised invitation began to press upon him as the day waned; and though he rated himself for being as nervous as a woman, and found a thousand good reasons to explain away the omission, it was with a boding heart that he set out, full early, for the palace. The Burgrave had treated his letter with contemptuous silence. Was it possible that there was a connection here with the non-fulfilment of the chamberlain's offered civility? If so, Steven had mightily

blundered.

The uninvited guest had planned to march boldly into the palace without further ado. But, somewhat to his surprise, and much to his discomfiture, there was an unusual and severe watch at Jerome's doors to-night. He was checked, questioned, his card was demanded of him, and on the representation that he had been verbally invited by the chamberlain, he was sent from pillar to post, and finally landed in a small ante-room, at the door of which a couple of lackeys presently stationed themselves as if to keep watch upon him. With burning indignation and an inexpressible sense of helplessness, he heard the music strike up far away; heard the gay passage of luckier guests without; in the intervals, the whispers and muffled laughter of the servants.

After prolonged delay, a majestic individual, with a gilt chain round his neck, entered and informed *M. le Comte* that his excellency the chamberlain deeply regretted his error of the previous day, but that the lists had already been closed. It had been deemed that, not receiving the card, *M. le Comte* would have fully understood.

Steven rose to his feet, turned a white face and blazing eyes on the official; the amazing slight to himself, conveyed by the flimsy and improbable excuse, sank into insignificance before the sense of the trickery that must have prompted it.

"Fetch me ink and paper," he demanded; "the matter does not end here."

With that suavity which, opposed to passion, becomes impertinence, the old man bowed and disappeared. Shortly afterwards the same porter whom Steven had interviewed the day before sidled into the room, bearing the required writing materials. As he bent across the young man, he whispered in friendly tones, one eye warily upon the watchers at the door:

"The gracious one would do well to be gone at his best speed. Should he give more trouble he may be arrested; odd orders are given at the palace to-night, please his graciousness."

It did not need long reflection to show Steven the wisdom of taking the hint. He had a sudden maddening vision of himself imprisoned, helpless, and Sidonia unprotected here. No one attempted to stop him; he passed out, unmolested, into the wet night. Long and restlessly he roamed the park, and then the streets, revolving endless and impossible plans of action. No plan, no solution, reached, he at last took his moody way back to the Friedrich's Platz.

Perhaps Geiger-Hans might have been inspired of their need! Perhaps, faint hope, he might find him waiting at the Aigle Imperial.

A very different personality sat in expectation of his return, feeding patience with cognac in the public room. It was General d'Albignac, the King's Master of the Horse.

At sight of Steven this worthy sprang to his feet and saluted with a great air of cordiality, running over the Austrian's name and title, and announcing his own in French, all glib affability.

"We have met before, sir," sternly said Steven, who was in fine humour for destruction.

"I think not," answered the equerry. His eyes had a red glitter which denied his smile. "I think not, *M. le Comte*. Nay, I am positive it is the first time I have had the pleasure of addressing you."

Steven shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it so," he said contemptuously, and glanced at the cheek against which his hand had once exulted. "After all, it is you who had the more striking cause to remember.—What do you want with me?" he added, with British bluntness.

D'Albignac's smile was stiff over his white teeth; his fingers twitched upon the bundle of papers he had pulled out of his sabretasche. But the Master of the Horse had no illusions as to the length of Jerome's power; and, on the other hand, that document, once properly endorsed, meant his own future prosperity. It was worth a minute's urbanity towards one whom otherwise it would have been relief to hew down.

"I have business with you—business of delicacy, sir; I trust, easily despatched. A short private conversation between us." He cast a meaning look at the French officers playing piquet and tric-trac in their proximity.

"I can conceive no business," said Steven, "between us, sir, but one. Nevertheless, come to my room. I can promise you that my answer will be of quick despatch."

So he walked up the ill-lit stairs, with d'Albignac clanking at his heels, and pushed his way into his bed chamber before him—the creature should not be treated otherwise than as the dog he was.

"Shut the door," said he, "and say your say."

Again d'Albignac successfully fought his own fury.

"A matter of delicacy, as I said, my dear sir.... *Mademoiselle de Wellenshausen* is, you are aware, now at the palace?"

"Are you speaking of Countess Waldorff-Kielmansegg?" put in Steven, threatening.

"Immaterial, now!" deprecated the other. "The marriage, I understand, is regretted on both sides. Your signature here, and we see to the rest."

Steven listened with outward calmness.

"We?" echoed he. "What have you to say to this, Colonel d'Albignac?"

It is not always by weight of hand or stroke of sword that man can have his sweetest vengeance upon man. D'Albignac, as he replied, knew that he was

at last paying off scores:

"The King," he said—"my King, His Majesty Jerome, takes an interest in the lady."

Jerome...! This then explained all, explained the non-appearance of the card, the hostile reception at the palace. Sidonia, the child who had lain in his arms, and Jerome! Steven felt suddenly as if the clasps of his cloak were strangling him. He tore them apart, falling back two or three steps, that he might fling the burden on the bed. After that first flaming revelation there came to him a deadly calmness. He did not in the least know what he was about to do; it was quite possible that he might have to execute justice upon Jerome's dog before reaching Jerome himself; in any case, he must have his limbs free. The grating voice went on:

"It is my sovereign's desire that the young heiress of Wellenshausen should espouse a member of his own household. And his Majesty's choice has fallen upon your servant here. I may say the charming creature herself is not unwilling."

In that dangerous white mood of passion which can simulate highest composure, Steven heard without wincing.—Mechanically he gathered his cloak into a bundle and laid his hand on the curtain of his bed.—Then he stood silent, as if stricken, staring through the narrow opening of the damask folds, his back turned to his enemy.

D'Albignac rubbed his hands and chuckled. Was not all this better than the most sounding return slap in the face? Better even than feeling the easy steel run through flesh, grate against bone?

"And when my royal master," he pursued, "has a notion in his head, *mille tonnerres*, he is no more to be kept back than his Imperial brother from victory. Oh, he is of an impetuosity; *d'une fougue, d'une verve!* ... more eager even than myself, the lucky bridegroom, to have these papers executed. 'If you wait till to-morrow, d'Albignac, my friend,' he said to me, 'the count may be gone, and that may mean delay.... Intolerable!' Hence, *M. le Comte*, my unceremonious visit, and at this undue hour—already excused, no doubt! Your signature, please, here. I can be witness. One stroke of the pen, and you make three people happy ... not to speak of yourself!"

The cloak glided from Count Kielmansegg's arm on to the floor. He closed the curtains delicately and faced his visitor.

"If you will leave the deed, General," said he, "I will peruse it to-night, and you can have it back in the morning."

He took the paper with marked courtesy from d'Albignac's hand. His face was paler than before, but there was a singular smile upon it, a singular light in the eyes. The youth's composure completely deceived and imposed upon d'Albignac, who, indeed, was none of the subtle-witted.

"An annulment is easier to secure than a divorce, and makes less of a scandal, does it not?" he said, with an insufferable air of intelligence.

"I am quite of your opinion," answered Steven.

"*Sacrebleu*, and the girl is the greatest heiress in Westphalia! What a morgue these Austrians have! ... The merest hint, it is enough with them!" thought the General as he drew a noisy breath of laughter and relief. "Enchanted," he went on aloud, "enchanted, my young friend, to find you so reasonable. I see you take me—— Ah, yes; these are sad times; and the soldier of fortune (such as I am) cannot afford to be squeamish. Hey! the King sups with Countess Kielmansegg.... Nay, shall we not say ... *Mademoiselle de Wellenshausen?* ... to-night, at this very moment!"

Steven's smile flashed broadly a second. "He would grin on the rack," thought d'Albignac.

"*A demain*, General," said Steven, "but not before noon, please."

His tone was quiet, even soft. He advanced without hurry towards his visitor, tapped him lightly on the shoulder and pointed to the door.

The two stood looking, eye into eye; and the fighting brute rose again clamouring in d'Albignac's huge body. But something inscrutable in Steven's glance, its fire, almost its gaiety, made him quail. He felt that here he was more than matched, and broke ground with a clumsy bow—failure for irony. His great boots resounded down the wooden stairs.

* * * * *

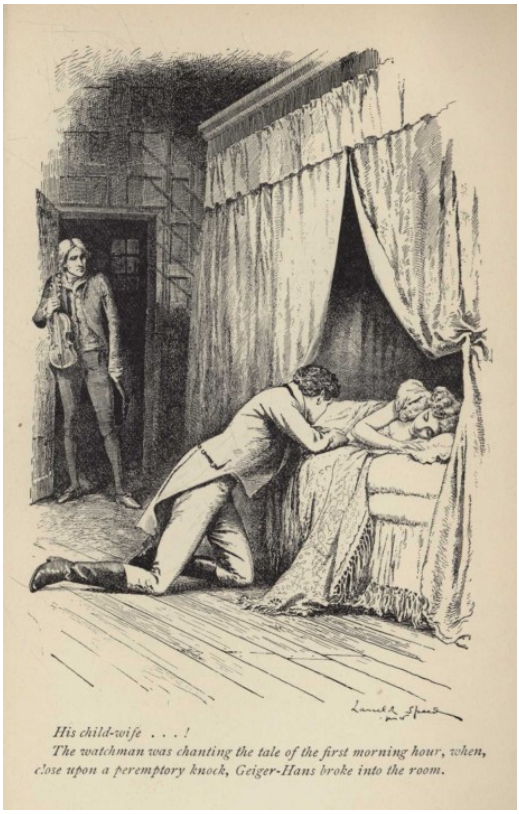
Steven parted the curtains and stood looking down upon the sleeping figure.

So the bird had come home, after all! Sidonia lay like the weary child she was, wrapped in so profound a slumber, the slumber of exhaustion, that even d'Albignac's noisy presence had failed to disturb her. Her slender arms were outflung, her hands faintly curled in an attitude of utter relaxation. Through parted lips her breath came as placidly as an infant's. The yellow hair sprang in tangled masses round the little pale face. Never had her extreme youth so utterly betrayed itself. But how wan she seemed; how worn out through all the placidity of her repose! The narrow satin skirts were frayed and sodden; one little silk-clad foot out-thrust, shoeless, was stained with mud—aye, and streaked with blood.

His child-wife...!

Over what rough ways had she come to him? Skirting what chasm, blacker, deeper, more relentless than the Burgrave's *oubliette*! Slowly, hardly wotting what he did, Steven went down on his knees beside her, unconsciously still clutching d'Albignac's paper. Over and above the old protective tenderness, an infinite tide of love flooded his whole being.—His child-wife!

The watchman was chanting the tale of the first morning hour, when, close upon a peremptory knock at the door, Geiger-Hans broke hurriedly into the room. He halted, though his mission was urgent, at sight of Steven's countenance.



His child-wife . . . !
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His child-wife...! The watchman was chanting the tale of the first morning hour, when, close upon a peremptory knock, Geiger-Hans broke into the room.

"Aha, all is well, then," he cried sharply, as the young man rose from his knees and came forward to meet him, and his own haggard features were suddenly illumined as by a reflection of the joy marked in the other's eyes. And then, it was no surprise to him that Sidonia, waking, should presently thrust out her

rosy face between the curtains: he had already known, through Steven's eyes, that the children he loved were together.

"Steven!" cried Sidonia.

"Ah, Sidonia...!"

He ran to her. And, regardless of Geiger-Hans, they clasped each other, the deed of annulment dropping between them.

* * * * *

"Now, children!" said Geiger-Hans, briskly—he was laughing, but the tears, which few had ever seen before in them, glittered in his eyes—"you will have plenty of time by and by; now it is haste, haste, haste! I have a carriage for you waiting below. Ha, little Madame Sidonia, laugh with me! It is the Burgravine's own carriage—nothing less! Nay, German wives do not so easily escape their husbands, even at Jerome's court. My Lady Burgravine makes no journeying to-night, or ever, if I may prophesy, away from her lord! A *berline* and four good posthorses ... 'twere pity to waste them! Quick, children! For I tell you night may not be over ere the storm break on this town!"

Sidonia had little preparation to make. She put on her cloak. From the depths of her hood, her happy eyes looked inquiringly at the fiddler.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Where?" replied the wanderer, "where, but to the forest, to the green arms that will hold your love so safely, so discreetly? To the quiet and peace of the forest, before you shape your way together, children, into the great noisy world. To the simplicity of the forest, you, young magnate, that you may for ever afterwards have a memory of love as the breath of nature itself to haunt you in your grandeur. To the Forest House, you, little madam, whither I once brought a youth who was missing his springtime and had lost his way, that he might find them both."

* * * * *

The fiddler sat on the box, and the horses went roundly. The rain had given place to a heavy autumnal mist, soaking, all encompassing. It muffled every sound, the drumming of the hoofs in the mud, the roll of the wheels, the very clack of the whip. But he drove with extraordinary sureness and speed in spite of the gloom, and the lamps of the *berline* soon cast their flashes out upon the flying ghosts of the poplars on the desert country road. It seemed as if the night, the whole world, connived at the lovers' flight, gathered round them in screening mystery and silence.

Sidonia lay on her husband's shoulder, half dreaming again in happy weariness, lulled by the monotonous movement and rhythm. It was from a profound sleep that she started suddenly with a faint cry:

"What was that?"—A dull boom was still droning in her ears.

"That was cannon," said Steven.

At this moment the carriage drew up, and they could hear the fiddler calling to them. Steven put his head out of the window and saw the dark face with its sardonic smile, lit up by the carriage-lamp, looking down at him.

"Did you mark that, comrade?—and again! Ha, there goes little brother Jerome's little throne! Hey, what a scuttle there be yonder now! My children, you have not run away together one hour too soon. That will no doubt be Csernischeff and his Cossacks; they have made good use of the first autumn fog. It is in with them by the Leipzig gate, no doubt—of ill omen! And few of our honest Westphalians will care to turn out to-night and be spitted or shot for the sweet eyes of Jerome. It is the end this time—meet that it should be our friends the Huns that do the scavenging.... You remember them, Count Steven, the carrion crows on the trail...?"

Sidonia pulled her husband back that she might look out in her turn. The red glow of some distant conflagration was beginning to be faintly perceptible behind them in the pall of fog. She had heard the fiddler's explanation, and rejoiced in her young, unforgiving heart. Yet already Cassel and its terrors were fading from her mind. She sniffed the wet air as a doe might; and while the fiddler gazed down at her, an air of tender amusement driving the scorn from his face, she strained her ear as though to catch some secret sounds.

"Yes, child," said he, nodding at her; "yes, it is the woods you smell, the trees you hear. Yonder is the inn of The Three Ways, and presently we shall turn into the forest road."

Sidonia sank back beside Steven, a smile upon her lips. Then they both became aware that they could see each other in a strange glimmer that was scarcely yet light. Without, the mist was now white, torn ever and anon by swaying streaks of faint blue.

"It is the new day," said she under her breath.

"The day that is ours," said Steven. And as they kissed, the horses' hoofs struck upon the ascent and the great trees sprang up about them.

By sunset they reached the Forest House.

And when the Forest-Mother beheld them, she clapped her hands and laughed, and called on heaven and all the saints, and then kissed them all three—a freedom she never could recall afterwards without amazement—and, finally, she

flung her blue embroidered apron over her head and wept aloud in gladness.

But nothing could hamper the preparation of the finest supper that ever the Forest House had seen; and about it there drew together such a happy company as even its happy walls had never held before.

By and by they sat round the great hearth. Some one asked Geiger-Hans for music. But he shook his head. And spells of silence ever more frequent and prolonged began to fall between the talking and laughing; the great peace of the forest was drawing about the lovers and holding them close even as he had prophesied. As the light of the fire played upon the musician's face it showed a great serenity. It was a blessed evening.

"You will always live with us, dear Geiger-Hans," said Sidonia over and over again. And each time he made no answer, but smiled as if content.

* * * * *

Now, in the wonderful dawn of the forest, Steven awoke; and though his heart was as a bird's in spring for happiness, yet was there a sense of trouble, of anxiety, upon him which had seemed woven into his dreams.

They had left their window open to the moonlight, and it had flooded in upon them, but the dawn mystery without held aloof, veiled from sight like an Eastern bride. Thin grey vapours hung as a curtain before the open casement. Steven sat up, his pulses beating fast. He strained his ear; heard flutter of leaves, drip of dew, chirp of awakening birds ... then a faint strain of music that seemed as if it passed through a dream. The melody grew more distinct, though still subdued; it rose, softly plaintive; it was joyous and yet sad, secret and yet an appeal. And through it all there was a rhythm as of restless feet:—it was a melody of love, of farewell, of wandering. Fainter it grew, and was lost once more in the whispers of the woods. At last it was silent, yet still it seemed to sing.

A sudden pain gripped Steven's heart. He knew that Geiger-Hans had gone out of their lives for ever.

The End

* * * * * * * *

The End

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