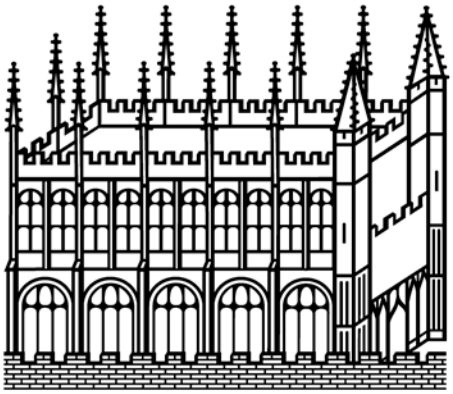

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IN THE COUNSELLOR'S HOUSE

MARLITT

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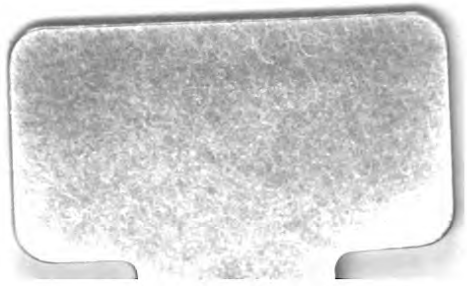

IN THE COUNSELLOR'S HOUSE.

BY

E. MARLITT,

AUTHOR OF "THE SECOND WIFE," ETC.

FROM THE GERMAN, BY ANNIE WOOD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.
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IN THE COUNSELLOR'S HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

KATHE wandered for a time aimlessly about the park in order to calm her agitated feelings before presenting herself to the scrutinizing eyes of the old lady in the house by the river-side. She had no wish for "Auntie Diakonus" to see her in her present excited state, for she knew that she would question her so closely as to the cause of her unhappiness that there would be no possibility of escaping from the kind

sympathy that would be shown her but by confessing the conversation she had just had with Flora; and perhaps her old friend would also think that it would be best for her to marry the Counsellor! They had all—Flora, Henriette, and the Doctor, agreed that she ought to do it—but she would resist to the end. They were each and all selfish, but she would not allow herself to be caught in any such golden net.

In anger and bitterness she stood still for a while and gazed at the ruin in front of her. She was tired, and had wandered round on this side of the park without taking any heed to the direction in which she was going.

The sun was fast travelling westward, and shining with broad, purple, and golden tints on the dark background of the forest, and lighting the tiny waves of the stream around the ruin with gleaming

changing colours. The huge form of the tower rose like a black marble monument from the midst of the laughing valley, and at the side stood the thick group of nut-trees through the branches of which scarce a gleam of daylight could penetrate.

The young girl glanced across the flowing stream to one of the windows of the dark tower with a frown on her brow, and an angry expression about her mouth. Inside that room stood the famous iron safe containing her fortune, which up to to-day she had been rather afraid of, but which, now as she stood there gazing gloomily at the glowering tower, she hated as the innocent cause of all her troubles. That square iron chest was to take the place of the warmest feelings of her heart, around it all the wishes and longings of her life were to be centred. Whoever told her that he loved her, she would know that he loved her iron box better. Every kindly

look, each warm pressure of the hand would only mean that she was the owner of sums of money that were daily increasing in every corner of the globe. Even the rich and noble Counsellor Römer, her guardian, wished to be richer still, and to possess, as his own, her large fortune. All this her half-sister Flora had insinuated, and in so doing had wounded the young girl to the innermost depth of her soul.

Kathe presently noticed that underneath in the cellars of the towers one of the swing windows was partially open. Inside that window she knew that the rich man kept his old and costly wine. Only a few days before, she had accompanied Madame Urach and her half-sisters, under the guidance of her guardian, to see the new consignment of rich wine that had been ordered on one of his journeys to the capital, and had lately arrived and been placed in the immense vaults which formed

the foundation of the grand old ruin. She had felt the cool air fan her cheeks, had enjoyed the earthy odour which met her as she descended the beautifully clean steps leading to the vaults. She had wondered at the exquisite neatness and cleanliness all around her when she reached the vast caves; not a cobweb crossed the roof or hung to the sides of the stone juttings. In a room adjoining the vaults where all the glasses and decanters were kept, every article glittered and shone as bright and clear as when they were on the table in the dining-room. And then in the vault where the rarest and oldest wine was kept, stood the two famous tons of gunpowder looking so fresh and new that Kathe had laughingly remarked that they seemed to grow younger as the wine grew older, and that most likely they were touched up from time to time like the renowned spot on the Wartburg. But she did not like this corner, and was

glad to get away from it, and wondered involuntarily how her guardian could sleep peacefully with such a dangerous enemy so close beneath his apartments.

Presently Kathe turned away, and hurried back through the park in the direction of the house by the river. Several deer sprang across her path and gambolled around her, but to-day she had no bread in her pocket to give them, and she waved them away with her hand. She hurried on, and soon reached the other turn of the stream where she could easily distinguish the joyous shouts of children at play above the rush of the waters. Evidently the little pupils were romping in the garden, and as the sound of their voices reached her ears a warm happy feeling took possession of Kathe's heart, and helped to banish a great portion of the pain which had been weighing her down for the last hour. These little creatures, with their ringing laughter and

innocent eyes, knew nothing about strong boxes. They did not love her because she was an heiress, but accepted thankfully and without questioning the sweet fruit and bread she gave them, whenever they assembled together for their working lesson. They regarded her in no other light than as a kind gentle lady, to whom they could pour out their childish griefs, while feeling assured that sympathy would be given them in return, or whom they could challenge to a game of play in answer to her winsome smile. No, they loved her for herself, and not for the gold her grandfather had left her.

When Kathe crossed the bridge she could not see the children as they were playing in the garden behind the house; but she met the maid carrying a basket on her arm, on her way into town to purchase the evening provisions. She too had a great affection for Kathe, and dropped her

a curtsey and smiled a pleasant welcome to the young girl in answer to her gentle "good-afternoon."

The hall door stood wide open. Kathe slowly mounted the steps, intending to enter the house and find her way to "auntie's" room, without taking the trouble to announce her presence by ringing at the bell, as she knew the servant was out. But suddenly her feet stood still, for the Doctor's voice was saying—

"No, aunt, it is the noise bothers me—my head aches with it. When I do come here to give myself a little break in my work, I must have rest; complete rest. I need it, indeed I do," he added, in a tone of impatience, almost querulous in its sound, "I know I am asking a great sacrifice at your hands, aunt, but still I do ask you to give up these working afternoons, during the remaining few months I may be coming here to and fro. During these

months I will willingly hire a room in town, and engage a teacher to take your place, so that the little ones need not be neglected, but——"

"For heaven's sake don't talk like that, Leo," interrupted his aunt quickly; "I had no idea that this plan of mine was disagreeable to you. Not a sound shall disturb you again; trust me, dear boy; I will give it up. There is only one regret I have in the matter, Kathe——"

"Always that girl!" exclaimed the Doctor under his breath, as if his patience was beyond control, and he was too weary to conceal the irritated state of his feelings; "you never think of me now."

"What is the matter with you, Leo? What do you mean? You surely are not jealous of the love and affection of your old aunt!" exclaimed the elderly lady, half anxiously and half laughing. He did not reply; and the young girl standing outside

on the door-step, as if glued to the spot and quite unable to move, heard him begin slowly to pace the floor.

"Poor little Kathe! I can scarcely believe it possible that there exists a being who could object to such a sweet innocent young creature's presence," the old lady went on, following her nephew with her light footsteps; "I have never known a girl who possesses so much sweetness of disposition and purity of mind, mingled with such firm determination of character and true womanly instincts, as my little friend Kathe. I am very much attached to her, for I know her worth; but I did not think that you would ever become so unjust, Leo, as not to be able to endure the presence of any other girl by the side of your superbly beautiful lady-love."

Kathe started and trembled, as she heard the Doctor's loud sarcastic laugh ringing through the open window. She

involuntarily turned to flee; but a second later, she made up her mind to remain where she was, and to hear how he replied to his aunt's well-meant but unlucky speech. Her cheeks burned with shame, but she did not move.

"As a rule, aunt, you are a clear-headed, far-seeing woman, but in this instance you have failed to judge rightly," he said, as he laughed again a bitter short laugh; "I won't try to undeceive you—who likes to strike himself in the face? I have only one thing to beg of you, and that is, that you will return to our old habits of being with each other, while I remain here—that is, we will always be *alone*. Formerly, you were happy enough without the society of any young lady; try and be so still, aunt, for I will not have one coming and going while I am here."

"Not even Kathe?"

A sharp rather dull sound, and a general

shaking of furniture, left Kathe no doubt that this question had been met with an angry stamp of the foot.

"Aunt, shall I be forced into—" he cried bitterly, his voice scarcely recognizable.

"Do as you will, Leo, my boy," interrupted his aunt, startled and wondering at her nephew's strange humour; "you shall have your own way. I will manage as well as I can to make the banishment as little painful to the child as possible—but good heavens! Leo, how excited you look, and your hands are feverish—you must be ill—you are working too hard. Ah, well! dear boy, you shall be quiet enough here, depend upon that. Let me get you a glass of lemonade?"

"No, thank you," he answered quietly, as he opened the door. Kathe heard his aunt cross over to the kitchen, and a moment or two later the Doctor himself appeared on the broad door-step.

CHAPTER II.

NOT a couple of yards away, Kathe was leaning against the wall, her face pale as ashes, her teeth clenched together, and her eyes staring vacantly before her ; she was determined not to see the Doctor as he came out.

He started as he caught sight of her, and for a moment seemed too speechless to utter a sound.

" Kathe !" he presently exclaimed in a low voice, which trembled as in one awakening from a dream.

She drew herself together and shuddered ; then slowly walked a few steps

away from the wall against which she had been leaning, and when she reached the centre of the gravel pathway, she asked—

"What do you want, Herr Doctor?"

Her whole movement was like to an automaton; even as she slightly turned her head over her shoulder, it seemed as if she did it mechanically; and, but for the earnest flashing expression of her eyes, one might have imagined she was in a sleep.

The young man flushed like a girl as he went nearer to her and asked doubtingly—

"You have heard?"

"Yes," she said abruptly, with a bitter laugh, "every word you uttered, and I was struck with the good sense you evinced in banishing from your house all strange intruders; the walls have ears;" and she moved still farther away as if she wished to put as much space as possible

between her and the threshold over which she was never again to pass.

In the meantime he had recovered himself, and now strode forward to a garden table on which he flung down his hat, and drawing up his tall figure to its full height looked straight at Kathe with an expression in his face which seemed to say, that he was glad that chance had given him this opportunity, and that through no seeking of his own ; he seemed to breath freely as with a slight gesture he motioned to her to stand still.

" Fear of being overheard had no part in what I was saying to my aunt. This quiet house has no secret within its walls ; and what one shuts up within one's breast has no need to fear being overheard," he began with quiet earnestness. " You have overheard what I was saying, hence you know that for a time at least I am anxious to be as much alone as possible. I am

sorry to have to confess that I am so selfish; I know that you will scarcely understand me if I tell you that there are times when one's own thoughts are a curse, or perhaps it will be easier for you to comprehend the pain and agony it might be to drive those away from one's presence who could make home sweetest, and to have to flee from the one of all others one longs most to see."

She looked at him with her honest brave eyes and saw that he was in earnest, saw that he was speaking of himself, of his own pain and agony, that was only too visibly portrayed in his white face and drawn quivering lips; yet what could he mean?

He certainly did not flee the presence of his betrothed wife, the children at play behind the house had nothing to do with such painful emotions, so who could it be? there was no one else but herself—and herself? Ah, yes! she had involuntarily

witnessed two or three painful scenes between him and Flora, and he did not like to be reminded of them, so he made the noise of the pupils an excuse to get rid of her presence about the house. And as these thoughts rushed rapidly through her mind, her features assumed a fixed incredulous expression, and she answered coldly,—

"There is no necessity for you to give any reason for your actions, Dr. Bruck. You are master here, and of course can do as you please. But, what a great amount of interest you must take in the old Baroness von Steiner, to sacrifice your love of quiet to her unruly grandson and nursery governess. You offered to have both in your house for several weeks!"

It was a hard thrust for the young man, but sarcastically as the words were uttered the girl herself had no idea of the sharp-

ness of the wound she was inflicting by her bitter words.

"No, no, say nothing, not a word, I beg," she went on, passionately drawing nearer to him, and stretching out her hand imploringly as he opened his lips to speak. "I don't want you to give me a polite excuse, and say a word contrary to what you think. Do you imagine I do not know the real cause for this conduct of yours?" she gulped down the angry tears that were rising in her eyes, but her face flushed as she continued after a second pause. "I have once or twice unfortunately crossed your path at a time when you would have preferred being quiet by yourself, and I can thoroughly appreciate the bitterness of your remark just now when you exclaimed—'always that girl!' I have not forgiven myself for my awkwardness, though it was only on one occasion that I willingly meddled in your

affairs," again her face flushed painfully. "But you seem determined not to forgive me, and you resent it still without any mercy."

The young man made no reply, but closed his lips with a determined expression as if to prevent being tempted into opening them. He gazed down at the girl by his side with a strange impassioned earnestness in his eyes, and clenched the hand which rested on the garden table, till the knuckles seemed to start from their sockets. Every line of his handsome face and the attitude of his whole body betrayed the secret of the man's character, that reserve and strong power over self which rarely failed him, however trying the circumstance might be.

"It was greatly against my inclinations that I returned here at all," Kathe went on, after a rapid glance at her companion's grave countenance. "The old lady there,"

she pointed in the direction of the Villa, "poisoned my childish happiness by her cold pride and heartlessness, and the bitter tears she made my dear kind governess shed by her impertinent manners to her I can never forgive or forget. You, yourself, were a witness to the cold reception I had from my proud half-sister when I first arrived, a reception which made me long to turn my back on the Villa and take the first train home again to Dresden. Would that I had done it, too!" she added, with a strange pathos in her voice. "Added to all the puffed-up pride of position there is that horrid unbearable haughtiness of riches which seems to pervade the very furniture and air of the Villa," the girl went on, "and which hinders every expression of feeling and naturalness. My whole heart and soul rebel against living in such an atmosphere. And then here, here I found it so homelike," she stretched out

her arm towards the old-fashioned house and garden, and her face softened with a sweet yearning look, "here I could have forgotten my Dresden home, but why, I know not myself." Then her eyes brightened and her countenance glowed with inward emotion, as she went on again after a pause, "I think your dear old aunt has bewitched me. Her noble simple appearance is an incentive in itself to try and imitate her peaceful life. She does me good, and soothes and comforts me when I am perplexed and in difficulty. She goes about her work from morning till night so gently and noiselessly, and, although one rarely hears a reproof from her lips, never a harsh word, she still does more good by her example than any one I know; and whatever she thinks right she does, no matter if it is for or against the world's opinion. You can't tell how pleasant this is in contrast to the spirit of the people at the Villa,

where everything is sacrificed for society and appearance, even to truth and honourable dealing." And as she finished speaking Kathe knit her brows together and flung away, with an impatient gesture, a tiny branch of blossom she had snatched from a bush at her side and broken into several pieces.

This movement seemed to rouse the silent man before her into life. A flush mounted to his forehead and his eyes flashed.

"You have forgotten one virtue, my aunt, the 'dear, kind old lady,' possesses, and that is mildness in judgment," he said abruptly and sharply. "Never would she condemn another in the way you have just done, because she knows how easy it is to misunderstand another's motives for actions, and how possible it is to err in our judgment or to be mistaken in our own strength and power to do right."

He spoke sternly and with more excite-

ment in his manner than Kathe had ever noticed before, he seemed to forget his habitual reserve and to be eager only to prove her in the wrong. Although she drooped her eyelids till their long lashes touched her hot cheeks, Kathe felt she was right and that he was weak as water in his love for her beautiful sister. His aversion to herself was unaccountable; but for this, she felt she must to a large extent blame, not him, but herself. With this comforting thought she raised her eyes and threw back her head, and was about to speak when she was interrupted by the appearance of the children.

They had turned the corner of the house, in search of one of their companions, when they caught sight of Kathe, and a moment later they sprang around her, shouting with glee and delight at her arrival. They took no notice of the stern, grave-looking man standing near her, but nestled close to

their kind friend, taking her hands, touching her dress, while one or two of the little ones held up their rosy mouths for the kiss she had ever been ready to bestow.

Kathe smiled on all of them, but not with her usual bright sunny smile. The little ones, however, did not observe any change in her, but pressed closer to her, till she seemed overwhelmed with their caresses. Ere she had time to say a word of welcome to any of them, the grave face of the Doctor grew graver, an angry impatient expression escaped from his lips, and he ordered the children back to their playground behind the house, sternly forbidding them to appear again on this side of the garden till they were called, or had leave to come back.

They obeyed him at once after an astonished glance in his face, and a moment later, Kathe and he were alone again.

The young girl bit her lip and watched

the retreating figures of the children. When the last one had disappeared behind the stone jutting, she said in a tone which betrayed a mixture of anger and sorrow,—

"How willingly I would go after them, and comfort them, but of course I cannot think of returning one step over the ground I have traversed for the last time."

"You would like to comfort them!" remarked the Doctor mockingly. "Do you rank me then now as great a tyrant as a while ago you thought me weak? Console yourself! children carry their own comfort within them. Laughter and weeping live side by side with them. Listen to them now, that does not sound as if they needed comforting!" he added with a fleeting attempt at a smile, as he pointed over his shoulder in the direction whence came the noise. "I would bet anything *that* is about me and my harshness. It was for your sake that I

drove the sheep back into their pen, I could not bear to see them pulling you about like that. How can you like it yourself? The children are so badly brought up——"

"Because they love me? Thank God they do, and also that I can believe in *them* at least!" she cried out impetuously, clasping her hands on her bosom. "Would you have me believe that *they* too only care for me for my money's sake, that their tender loving noisy caresses are bestowed on me just and only because of my immense fortune? No, no, I will not believe it, I am sure that they love me for myself, and I will not let myself be convinced of the contrary. It is of no earthly use to try to do so even, I *will* believe in the children!" she cried with a piteous attempt at a smile.

He stepped back in surprise.

"What a very strange idea——"

"Why strange? Do you think it is so very wonderful then that at last I have been startled from my childish dream, that true warm feelings and noble aspirations were of value in the world? awoke to learn that such things, such sentiments were of secondary importance where money is con cerned? Is it nothing to lose one's confidence in all that is good, and to be laughed at for distinguishing between good and bad, truth and falsehood? It is a fearful shock suddenly to discover that all I have hitherto lived for and believed in, is of no account by the side of the hollow falseness of the world."

The young Doctor silently turned his eyes from her expressive face, pale and worn-looking with the excitement of her present state, but she heaved a deep sigh and went on passionately after a slight pause:

"You asked me at our very first inter-

view how I felt with my suddenly acquired riches. I am only now in a position to answer you that question rightly. It seems to me as if I had been plunged into a sea of gold, from whence no one cares to draw me for my own sake, but only for the sake of the golden waves which flow around me."

"How came you to have such a very odd impression as that?" asked the young man in a troubled tone of voice.

"You can ask me such a question!" she replied laughing bitterly; "ask it me when you must know that hourly and daily at the Villa I am forced into recognizing the omnipotence of my wealth, and made to understand that it, and it alone, is the only thing about me worth any consideration. In my dear old Dresden home I was often caressingly called the 'favourite of the fairies,' but here they tell me I was petted and made much of because my old Lucas

and her kind husband knew what I was worth in gold; my masters exaggerated the extent of my musical tastes for the sake of the heavy fees I paid them, and now my guardian makes love to his ward because—because of her rich inheritance."

At first, while speaking, the excited girl had gazed in front of her over the rolling water and fields and meadows, but with her last words she looked him straight in the face, and watched him earnestly for a moment as if anxious to understand why he started so violently and shivered visibly.

"Is that a fact?" he stammered out as he passed his hands quickly over his brow. "And does it pain you so deeply that Moriz thinks thus of you?" he asked after a momentary pause.

His voice was so broken, his look so eager, that she was surprised and perplexed.

"It pains me much more to hear how every one thinks that he or she has a right to interfere in the matter," she replied, drawing up her little rounded youthful figure to its full height, and unconsciously assuming a maidenly dignity of demeanour that greatly enhanced her beauty. Then shaking her head dubiously she went on with a bitter smile playing around her lips: "Such a poor little fish as I am too! I have as much as I can do to keep myself from being caught in the net of selfishness, or being made into a ball to be tossed from here to there, but I will not allow it, no, I will not!" she added with energy. "And you too, Doctor, you are as bad as the others. You also belong to those at the Villa, who imagine that because I am a young girl without any fixed natural home that I ought to have all my wishes and actions ruled and ordered according to the caprice of those around me, without stay-

ing to consider if I have any right or inclination to conform to these orders. You coolly banish me from your aunt's presence, and yet you would like to hang a chain round my neck and force me to remain at the Villa. I should like to know very much indeed why you join in such arbitrary proceedings, or rather no——" her lips quivered and her eyes filled with tears. "I will ask you with Henriette, 'what have I done that you shun me at every turn?'"

She spoke clearly, almost sharply in her passionate earnestness, and forgetful of her lately assumed dignity, bent her head forward and raised her tear-dimmed eyes to his.

"Silence, Kathe, silence! not a word more!" he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, seizing her left wrist so tightly that she shrunk back, frightened at the vehemence her words had roused in the hitherto stern, proud, passive young man.

"Did I not know for certain that there is not a trace of coquetry or falseness in your nature, I should be obliged to think that you were adopting the most refined of all cruel tortures to wrench a hidden bitter secret from me," and letting go her hand he muttered in a thick voice, "but you shall not, no, by Heavens you shall not!"

He crossed his arms on his breast and moved a few steps away from her, then suddenly turning and facing the frightened girl, who seemed rooted to the spot, he said quietly:

"I, in my turn, should like to know to what you refer by saying that I have fastened a chain round your neck to keep you at the Villa. It interests me—may I hear what you mean?" he added, as he retraced his steps till he again stood in front of her.

Kathe blushed scarlet, and for a moment hesitated as a shy reserved feeling made

her inclined to be silent, but a glance at his grave face reassured her, and she answered gently,

"You wish me to be—become mistress at the Villa, and——"

"I—I?" he stared incredulously at her for a moment, then burst into a peal of hollow laughter, the same kind of laughter which had startled Kathe so much when he was talking to his aunt. "Why do you ask me — *me* such a question? Why should I wish to see you mistress at the Villa?" he asked, forcing himself to be quiet and his voice to be steady.

"Flora told me that you were anxious that Henriette should not be left alone," she answered, with simple straightforwardness. "You are pleased to be content with the care and affection I naturally bestow on my poor, delicate sister; and in order to assure to her the same care for the future, and to secure the Counsellor's house, the

old family house, as hers for ever, you think it would be well, at least so I am informed, for me to become—my guardian's wife."

"And you believe that I am at the bottom of such an intrigue? Do you really believe it? Have you forgotten so soon that it is, or rather was, entirely against my expressed wish that you devoted yourself to nursing your sister and prolonging your visit at the Villa?"

"Things have changed very much since then," she replied quickly and bitterly. "You will leave this in September for good, and I do not see how, after that, it can matter to you who comes and goes at the Villa. Your comfort will then no longer be interfered with by a person for whom you have no sympathy——"

"Kathe!" he stammered, under his breath.

"Well, Doctor?" she said quietly, keeping

her head erect and looking him straight in the face. "The reason for such an arrangement was plain enough for any one who was not as blind as I have been to what was going on around me," she added in a tone of voice as if she had suddenly acquired years of experience in worldly matters. "One can see the reason for it all" she went on, quietly; but her lips quivered as she spoke. "The whole household arrangements could remain as they are — no stranger need enter the family. Comfort and luxury would remain in the Villa, as also in the apartments up there in the Tower; nothing need be altered—not even my iron strong box need be moved from its place in Moriz's private smoking den! it was all splendidly planned——"

"And pleased you so much that you do not hesitate for a second to remain," he interrupted eagerly, his breath heaving,

his whole attitude betokening angry impatience, as if he would greedily snatch the words from her lips before they were uttered.

"No, Dr. Bruck, you are triumphing over me too soon," she cried in answer, as a sudden light broke over her sweet face, and her cheeks grew a rosy red. "I am obstinate and do not intend remaining in spite of these charming arrangements. I am going away—going to-day even. I came over from the Villa a while ago to bid farewell to your aunt, and to tell her I was going back to Dresden; and even then I should have smiled most probably over your decree of banishment, if it had not pained me so much. My sisters have only just opened my eyes to the 'happiness' that was planned out for my future life. At the moment I felt that there was no other road for me to take but the one which led straight from the drawing-room to the rail-

way station, and thence home to Dresden—and I should have taken it had I not remembered in time that this was the afternoon on which I had promised your aunt to help her with the children, so I came here first to say good-bye. I shall not be away for very long, only long enough to convince Moriz that neither now nor in the future will I tolerate any other sentiment from him than that of kindly interest in my affairs, and that he neither can nor ever will be dearer to me than as the kind guardian chosen for me by my father, for whom I have great respect, but not one atom of love."

Her bosom heaved as she spoke, and her face flushed to the roots of her hair with shame. But one could see that, cost what it might, she was determined to let the young man standing before her—his eager eyes looking straight into hers with a searching glance that wrenched the truth

from her almost in spite of herself—to let him know that whatever plans had been made for her in reference to the Counsellor, she, at least, had no intention of carrying them out, and that as far as her feelings for her guardian were concerned, she was heart-whole.

"Since that day when we carried Henriette into your house, Herr Doctor, a warm affection has sprung up on her side for your aunt," Kathe continued, avoiding his eyes as much as she could. "I was very glad of this; and a while ago, when I resolved to return to Dresden, I meant to ask your aunt to kindly foster this love, and allow Henriette to come and see her as much as possible. But now of course all that is altered, and she would not dream of trespassing on ground from which I have been banished. I will write to 'auntie' from Dresden, for I would not go back even those few steps," and she pointed to-

wards the house with a proud gesture, "after your expressed wish not to be troubled with my presence."

She turned slowly and walked quietly past him, bowing slightly as she said:

"Farewell, Herr Doctor!"

When she reached the old rustic bridge she turned to take one last look at the old house. The children were peeping round the side of the stone jutting, with wonder and astonishment depicted on their bright little faces, scarcely able to believe the evidence of their eyes when they saw Kathe move in the direction of the bridge, instead of joining them in the garden, according to her unfailing habit hitherto. They would have run over to her and shouted out their surprise at the strange behaviour if they had not been in too much awe of the stern, tall gentleman leaning against the wall. Kathe's eyes wandered from the house to the spot she had just left,

and no sooner did she catch sight of the Doctor, holding on to the table as if afraid of falling to the earth, his face pale and his eyes staring wildly before him, than she sprang forward, dashed like lightning to his side, and, laying her warm, soft hands on his, exclaimed under her breath—

"Are you ill, Dr. Bruck? What is the matter?"

"No, Kathe, not ill; but weak—weak, as you accused me of being just now," he answered wearily, as if waking from a dream; and lifting his hand he pushed the hair from his brow. Then he added roughly and suddenly, bending towards her till his hot breath fanned her cheek—

"Go, child, go! Can't you see how I suffer, and that each look of yours, each kindly word, stabs me to the heart? Go, only go!" but ere she had time to obey his harsh request he stooped his head and

pressed his hot, burning lips in one long, passionate kiss on the little hand which lay on his.

The girl started and turned pale, but her heart gave one great bound of joy, and a feeling of sweet tenderness for the suffering man stole through her as the words rose to her lips :

" No, I will not go ; you need me now."

But she checked them ere they were uttered, and glancing for a second at the bowed head and the out-stretched hand pointing so beseechingly towards the bridge, she turned away hurriedly, and swift as if an avenging angel were behind her, she flew across the meadows and under the shade of the park trees, not staying her flight till she had reached the close proximity of the Villa.

A few hours later, with her face concealed behind a veil and a small travelling-bag in her hand, Kathe silently descended

a side staircase and left the house as suddenly and unexpectedly as she had arrived.

Henriette had shed many bitter tears, but she had unhesitatingly acknowledged that perhaps Kathe was right in thus quitting the shelter of her guardian's roof for a brief period, in consideration of Flora's great want of tact when speaking on the subject of Moriz's intentions towards her. She had also agreed to Kathe's plan of returning at once to her Dresden home, and from thence writing to explain her wishes, and she promised to announce her departure as soon as the train had been gone about an hour. She kissed Kathe with a convulsive heaving of the chest, but she helped her to pack a few things together, made her drink a cup of tea, kissed her again and then let her go, standing at the top of the winding staircase to watch her exit from the house.

When Kathe reached the ground floor

she had to employ some little address to pass out unnoticed. The gas was burning brightly in every corner of the large outer hall and side corridors, several footmen were loitering about assisting the guests, who were now beginning to arrive in rapid succession.

Once Kathe had to hide behind an immense group of flowers to avoid being seen by a beautifully dressed lady who stood aside to arrange some fault in her toilette, and while waiting she saw the drawing-room door open opposite, and Flora magnificently arrayed in pale rose-colour and lace receiving the guests assembled in her honour, with her fair false face unclouded by a single painful regret for the mischief she had wilfully and wickedly wrought.

With a deep sigh but a firm tread, Kathe hurried across the side hall and out into the park; and while the maid upstairs was

arranging her ball-dress and wondering why her young lady did not come to be attired for the evening festivities, she walked quickly over to the mill, knocked at Franz's window, and without giving him a word of explanation ordered him to accompany her at once to the station, to catch the next train, due in half an hour, for Dresden.

CHAPTER III.

SINCE then three months have passed away, during which Kathe gave herself up to the study of music with a feverish passion and earnestness which she hoped would produce forgetfulness and bring its own reward — a peaceful heart. She had been kept informed of the doings at the Villa by Henriette, who sent her every week a kind of diary which was written day by day, but only despatched to Dresden about twice a fortnight. Thus she had been able to gather that Madame Urach had rather blessed Heaven in a grand way for her

sudden flight from the Villa, and that Flora had merely shrugged her shoulders and declared it was just a girlish proceeding and one not at all to be wondered at from such an impulsive young lady as Kathe. Then, too, she learned through the same source that Henriette had announced her abrupt departure to the Counsellor while quietly sitting in the music-room; that he grew white and angry at the news, and but for the presence of their guests a terrible family quarrel would have ensued, Flora had happily averted it by her cold indifference to family emotions, and the fascination of manner she chose on this occasion to display, to hide their host's gloom and pre-occupation. Flora's lover, Dr. Bruck, had not been able to put in an appearance at all during the evening, in consequence of being called away to the bedside of a patient dangerously ill.

A day or two following Kathe's arrival

in Dresden, she had received a letter from her guardian stating that before the month of June was out he would be in Dresden himself to "demand an explanation" of her "strange conduct." But as time rolled onwards, Henriette's weekly despatch mentioned the constant arrival of telegrams from Berlin, where the Counsellor was staying on business without any immediate hope of his being free to travel as far as Dresden for some time to come. Thus, the visit was put off indefinitely, and after a while even his hasty scrawls grew less and less, till at last a remittance reached her for the first time through the hands of a clerk.

Kathe breathed freely at last—the conflict she had so dreaded was evidently not to take place, and her guardian had understood from her letters, that he had nothing to hope for either in the present or the future. Hence she now considered that

she was at liberty to return to the Villa, and resume her care of Henriette. But Madame Lukas strenuously opposed any such proposition, and declared that Kathe had altered so much during her stay with her invalid sister, had lost so much colour, and so much of her happy joyous brightness, that she was sure it was best for her to remain where she was till she had become quite strong, and had regained the blooming rosiness of her cheeks. "Besides," she added, to clench her argument, "Madame Steiner is staying, as you know, at the Villa, and what with her son's governess and her personal attendants, I am sure there is not the smallest chance of your finding a spare room to sleep in."

But Kathe herself shrank from returning to the Villa until after Flora's marriage and her consequent removal to Leipzig. She knew that it would be quite impossible for her to try and maintain an

outward show of peace, in the midst of the many conflicting relations she would have to pass through, if she lived under the same roof as her sisters, for the few months before the wedding. It required, indeed, all the powers of dissimulation she could call to her aid, to hide from the loving eyes of her Dresden home that she had lost her peace of mind, that her heart ached, and that she had—unconsciously at first it is true—grown to care for a man who was bound in honour and by every outward social tie to her sister—and whom to think of, the world would call sin.

As yet Henriette had not urged her to return, in spite of her oft-repeated longings for her presence, but she spoke in glowing terms of "Auntie Diakonus's" great kindness to her, and of how she did all in her power to make the lonely invalid girl's life less lonely than her suffering. The weekly letters contained long ac-

counts of everything that transpired at the house by the river—in fact the Doctor and his aunt were the two principal personages mentioned on every page—and from the death of a tiny yellow chicken to the gathering of the grapes in the grape-house, Henriette retailed for Kathe's benefit their daily life, their daily joys and sorrows, the ins and outs of their domestic affairs, and, as well as she could, the impression all these things made on the two beings so dear to her heart. Here and there the leaves of the letter would be marked with traces of tears, especially when the subject was Flora—but not a word did she write of Flora's relations with her lover; only now and again she would burst forth into strong lamentations that the increasing practice of the latter left him very little time to visit the Villa, and once that he was growing so irritable and impatient, that his whole nature seemed changed.

And thus the time slipped away, till there were only a few days left before the wedding. Flora had as yet sent no invitation to her young step-sister in Dresden. "Her head *is* so full of all the entertainments being given in her honour," Henriette wrote, "that she seems unable to think of anything else," and that accounted for her being as "capricious as ever." "We have hardly time to breathe now, and what it will be when the wedding gaieties begin at home, I must leave you to judge for yourself, Kathe," she added, in another letter and then went on to say, that she was already worn out with the confusion and whirl around her, and that she looked forward with dread to the eventful day, as she knew that "auntie" was so wrapt up in her own grief at parting with her nephew, that she would be of no use to her, and on no account would she face the festivities attendant on the

marriage alone. Day after day the poor girl wrote in this strain, till one evening about three days before the wedding, Kathe received a telegram begging her to "Come at once! I am very ill."

There was no refusing such an appeal. Even Madame Lukas was forced to acknowledge that Kathe ought to go and take care of her sister, at such a trying time. And Kathe herself? when she first read the telegram demanding her presence at the Villa she shivered with a nervous dread of what might be awaiting her there—but her next thought was one of jubilant delight, that she would at least see him, who was so soon to become her brother-in-law, once again ere he became her sister's husband.

And so it happened that one fine September morning Kathe stood again in the old familiar Mill-house parlour, awaiting her breakfast, after travelling all night in

the train. She had only just arrived from the station, where she had been met by old Franz, according to her expressed wish.

The room in which she was standing was shaded from the full glare of daylight by the rich chestnut-trees in front of the windows; the air was perfumed with the smell of roses, heliotrope, and mignonette, which filled the vases on the table and stand. A snow-white counterpane covered the bed in the alcove; and on the exquisitely clean deal table in the centre of the parlour, stood the old-fashioned coffee-urn, steaming hot with the welcome beverage, while a fresh-baked cake, covered with sugar, was placed by the side of a cup and saucer of rare and old china, that had once belonged to Kathe's grandmother.

The floor beneath her feet vibrated with the turning of the mill-wheels in the room below; she heard the cooing of the doves

through the open windows, and the splash of the water against the wheel of the turn-mill outside. She was at home in her own house, and here she determined to remain, no matter how much Madame Urach might turn up her nose at the intercourse between the Villa and the Mill-house. She would go to and fro to see Henriette, stay with her as long as possible during the day; but nothing should induce her again to take up her abode at the Villa, while she had it in her power to remain where she was.

The girl was very silent as she sat at her breakfast. She dreaded her first visit to the Villa, with a strange palpitation of the heart, that made her feel angry and vexed with herself; and a painful longing crept over her to see the old house by the river, the weather-cock of which was just discernible through the trees in the distance. But her cheeks flushed as she re-

called to her memory the fact that she had been banished from that house by its master, whose grave, earnest face she had first met in the very room where she was now sitting. And then a wild longing sprang up in her heart to see him again. She could not forget him ; for she knew now—had known for a long time—that she loved him with all the passionate warmth of her nature. It tortured her to know it. She struggled against it with all her strength of will, but she could not forget him.

Then she rose and went to the window, which commanded a view of the spinning manufactory formerly belonging to the Counsellor, her guardian. Her attention was arrested by a number of people congregated together around the public entrance, and her thoughts flew off to a conversation she had heard between two of her fellow travellers in the train, in which one and the other alternately expressed

great apprehensions of danger from the present insubordinate state of the working classes. The topic had been often discussed in her presence during the past few months in Dresden, and reference had been made over and over again to the disgraceful attempt in the forest on Flora by a few of the female mill hands, as an example of the pass things were coming to with the lower orders.

As she stood at the window Kathe heard the murmur of human voices above the sound of the cooing of the doves and the splash of the water on the turning wind-mill. She watched the crowd swaying to and fro with excited gesticulations, as on that day in the spring when the mill hands had been informed that their master had sold his manufactory to a company of stockbrokers. This company had failed, and the machines being all stopped, the workmen were in a state of agitation and anger.

"It's always so," said old Franz, who had just brought in Kathe's trunk, and was now looking out of the window at her side. "The men were well off before, but they were always grumbling then. Now they have had a change of masters. See, there they are, none the better for it either; changing their horses for donkeys, and getting a bad time of it. Each hopes to gain by bad practices, but you see it won't do; and one can hardly find it in one's heart to blame the youngsters, when their elders set them such a pitiful example.

"Honourable dealings with rich and poor—that's my ideas of honesty," continued old Franz, gently tapping the table with his rough fingers; "and that's the best way of earning a good sound sleep every night. Those who don't understand the art of speculating, have no right to meddle with it. There's the master there, the Counsellor: he understands it right

well, and is as safe as a trivet, because he has a steady head, cool judgment, and plenty of sense." Then, putting his forefinger to his nose, he added knowingly, "He came back yesterday from Berlin; I saw him at the station, where I had gone with some grain. And didn't he make his two roans fly like the wind! He knows what is what, if any one does. The people down there are saying that he must have returned from some successful transaction, he looks so contented and happy. He has been a precious long time away; and he wouldn't have returned to-night if it were not the eve of the wedding; and grand doings are going on, I can tell you, Fräulein."

The eve of the wedding! So soon! Kathe had known that the marriage was fixed for the following day, and that immediately after the ceremony the young couple were to start on a journey. She

had read it over and over again in Henriette's weekly letters; but now that old Franz mentioned the fact by word of mouth, it seemed as if she had heard it for the first time this morning; and in so hearing it experienced a dull, heavy, aching pain at her heart, that made her catch her breath and feel inclined to cry out aloud.

"Yes, indeed, there are to be grand doings," remarked Susanne, while pouring out the fragrant coffee and handing it to her young mistress. "Only yesterday the Counsellor's butler was telling me that so many guests have been invited, he doesn't believe there will be room for 'em all. There are to be private theatricals too, and several young ladies are coming from town dressed in costume, and cartloads of green foliage have been fetched from the forest to ornament the stage; and there is to be dancing and charades, and fun of all sorts, as there always is, thank God, on

the eve of every wedding in this blessed country. I am rejoiced you've come, Fräulein, to join in the festivities. Fräulein Henriette will just go stark mad from joy, poor suffering lamb !"

It was toning eleven by the great Tower clock as Kathe left the Mill-house on her way to the Villa, and a moment after she heard the clear metallic ring of the spinning manufactory clock strike out the same hour as she passed across the courtyard ; but directly she had closed the private door leading from the mill to the park she found herself surrounded by a deep intense stillness, which was much more in harmony with her present mood than the chattering of old Susanne about the affairs at the Villa, or the noise of the grinding machines at the mill.

Franz was right when he said that the Counsellor "understood the art of speculating" to a successful end. Everything

around her bespoke the owner of this beautiful place as a rich man. Before her stretched a gleaming mirror of water in which the bright sunny tints of the blue heavens above were reflected, and the lovely foliage of the trees around shaded here and there into the rich brown, yellow, and red of autumn, formed a striking and exquisite contrast to the glitter and sheen of the miniature lake. This lake had been finished far sooner than Kathe had any idea was possible in such an immense undertaking, and that too was another proof of the riches possessed by her guardian. Swans were arching their graceful necks on the surface of the shining water, and on the opposite side a tiny boat was moored to the steps of a prettily built boat-house.

Wandering along under the trees she noticed how beautifully the park was kept —not a handful of dead leaves could have

been gathered from the paths—not a weed nor a blade of grass were to be seen on the cleanly swept walks, injured branches were carefully pruned away from contact with healthy ones, and even the ivy was trained to hang in graceful festoons from tree to tree, and to cling to various huge moss-covered stones laid about for the purpose. Numbers of gardeners were employed on this work all the year round, and this, as Kathe vaguely thought to herself, was again a proof of the wealth possessed by her guardian.

She wandered on, and presently turned into the winding linden avenue which led to the house. Never before had Kathe felt so unwilling to enter that fairy castle looking so bright and gleaming in the sunlight, as she did now. Involuntarily she clasped her hands to her bosom, as she came in sight of its proud turrets and polished balconies, and the flag waving

over the chimney pots, a sure sign of the festivities going on beneath its roof. The blood mounted to her brow as she remembered that she had not been invited; yet there she was, about to enter its portals and join in the amusements arranged for others. It was a great proof of her sisterly affection that she could thus lay aside her pride, for the sake of Henriette's welfare. It had required a great struggle with herself, but love had triumphed over pride, and here she was within a few yards of the grand entrance to the house she had left three months ago, like a fugitive fleeing before an enemy. Raising her eyes to the balcony she saw Madame Urach's favourite dog snapping and barking at every one who entered the room, and on the left of one of the windows a parrot was screaming as loud as it could, in angry defiance at the dog's howling.

When Kathe reached the hall a lady

was crossing to a room on the opposite side, with a lace pocket-handkerchief held to her eyes, and evidently weeping bitter floods of tears. Kathe recognized her as the wife of an officer in the army whose extravagant dress was one of the topics of scandal in town.

"Her husband will have to pay up now —the very bed will be taken from under him," Kathe heard one of the servants say in the room of the hall devoted to the footmen; "and serve him right too! What business had an officer like the Major to go speculating in things he did not understand? And there goes his wife who has been begging the Counsellor to help them out of their difficulties. If he were to begin opening his purse to all those who have come to grief in this last smash, which involves the spinning manufactory, why he might as well pick up a staff and go begging himself, for he wouldn't have a penny left."

Kathe shuddered as the heartless words fell on her ears, and mechanically mounted the broad staircase leading to the rooms she had occupied in the spring. Hearing no movement within, she opened the door and went in. She noticed in a moment that the room had not been put in order for another guest since Baroness Steiner's departure. Some of the furniture had been removed, and in its place two or three long tables were standing against the walls covered with heaps of linen and articles of apparel that evidently formed part of the bridal trousseau. From a mahogany tree in the centre of the apartment hung a shining mass of cream-coloured satin covered in part with costly lace, and ornamented with orange blossoms and myrtle, and although it hung from a high stand, the train of the drapery lay low on the floor around for the space of several feet.

"Flora's wedding finery!" said Kathe to herself as she closed the door, and a moment or two later she found her way into Henriette's room, where the suffering girl received her with a wild scream of delight and fond words of endearment that warmed her heart and made her forget for the time being the effort it had cost her to answer the telegram in person.

Henriette was quite alone. No one had any time for her, she complained. The Counsellor monopolized Flora's entire attention in arranging the marriage festivities, for he was taking this opportunity of showing to the town that he knew how to do things on a grand scale, and that money was of no object to him when once he had made up his mind to spend it. Lately he seemed to have a sort of craving to spend money, and to have all the arrangements for the marriage carried out on a regal scale. Then she informed Kathe

that she had not told any one about the telegram, adding as she saw Kathe's eyes open with astonishment and her head shake deprecatingly, "It was quite unnecessary, dear; I have always told them that you would come back soon, and they ought to know for themselves that in my weak state I need you now to nurse me more than last spring." Then seeing an anxious look on Kathe's face, she comforted her by saying that there was nothing to fear from the Counsellor's attentions, as he had found some one else to care for in Berlin, from all she could gather. He had twice stayed away so long that on his return Flora had insinuated laughingly that he must have found an attraction there to keep him; which he had not denied, but rather, on the contrary, had allowed was a very good reason for his absence.

Kathe made no remark in reply to this communication, but she found herself

thinking that perhaps the wisest course for her to pursue would be to take the next train back to Dresden. She thought Henriette looked very ill, and her hollow cough seemed to shake the frail body more often than in the spring; her hands were burning, and her breathing was much shorter and more laboured than Kathe had ever seen it before. Formerly Henriette had never allowed herself to weep, but now, after a glance at her sister's face, she burst into a flood of tears, and begged Kathe not to leave her, she felt so utterly lonely and miserable.

Kathe comforted her to the best of her power, and assured her she would stay with her at least till after the wedding; but then the mention of the wedding produced another outburst of weeping, in which Henriette sobbed out her fears that Dr. Bruck would be unhappy with Flora as his wife, in spite of the love he had for her,

and hiding her head on Kathe's bosom, she intimated that, although "auntie" had kept her own counsel and said nothing about the matter, yet that she, Henriette, was sure the old lady shared her fears and even blamed herself for allowing——

But Kathe cut these lamentations short by remarking that the affair was Dr. Bruck's and his alone, that he had had ample opportunity of judging Flora's disposition during the last year, and he must now meet his fate and accept the consequences of his own acts, be they what they might.

Henriette started back in surprise as the bitter words fell from Kathe's lips in a hard metallic voice, but she dried her eyes and said nothing while Kathe took off her things.

CHAPTER IV.

HALF an hour later Kathe gently helped Henriette to descend the stairs in order to announce her arrival to the rest of the family. When the two girls reached the side hall, where Kathe had hidden for a moment behind the flowers the night of her flight, now three months ago, she stood still for a second to take a peep into the large reception-room immediately facing her, from which a strange humming monotonous sound of voices proceeded.

"They are rehearsing for to-night," explained Henriette in a short contemptuous

tone after listening to the sound for a moment. "How I detest all those girls! They would like to scratch Flora's face I know, and yet there they are making fools of themselves in trying to declaim some such poetical stuff, as that her brow is worthy of the kiss with which genius greeted her, and that her beauty is more beautiful than the flowers which adorn her dress, &c. Bah! I have no patience with such nonsense. And Moriz is behaving like an idiot. Just fancy what he did yesterday evening, not an hour after his arrival home! He had all the decorations taken down from the walls, because, forsooth, the workmen, like sensible fellows, had used stuff instead of silk damask to cover the hidden portions of the stage; he seems to me to squander his money in the most reckless, nay, wicked fashion. Look here!"

She pushed back one of the folding-doors, in order to allow Kathe space to see

into the room, and look at a magnificent purple velvet canopy bordered with gold fringe, under which the bridal pair were to sit on a daïs during the evening's amusements.

"How will the bridegroom's dark pale countenance look under that costly absurdity?" whispered Henriette, with a sarcastic smile hovering round her thin lips. "She will stand near him smiling triumphantly, arching her proud neck, and dressed in the most artlessly simple white tulle robe, the effect of which has been studied for weeks. It is trimmed with daisies. the sweet innocent little flowers being considered the most fitting emblem of the feelings of a bride on the eve of her marriage. Bah! Kathe, Kathe, you cannot understand how I abhor all this costly show lately—how I shrink from the sham and falseness of the life about me," cried the girl in nervous excitement, and

adding as she clung for a moment to Kathe's strong supporting figure, "I seem to feel within me a sort of presentiment that some terrible disaster is about to happen, or some secret start into light like a curling flame out of smouldering ashes."

"Hush, hush, dear!" was all Kathe could answer in words, but she held her feeble sister in her strong embrace, and waited till her trembling frame had become composed, before proceeding across the hall.

Madame Urach, Flora, and the Counsellor were sitting at breakfast in the dining-room, when the two young girls entered. The bride-elect was arrayed in a grey rose-bordered morning robe, with a dainty little lace cap ornamenting her head. Kathe was startled at the sharp worn look of the face, without the golden fringe of curls which usually ornamented Flora's forehead later on in the day, and she could not avoid confessing to herself that her

lovely sister's youthful appearance had considerably lessened, since she last saw her. The oval of the face had assumed a hard sharp outline, and here and there around her eyes and mouth, traces of furrows were very distinctly to be seen.

"Good gracious, Kathe, whatever made you choose this day of all days in the year to come back amongst us, like a bad penny?" she cried, making an effort to conceal her mortification and annoyance at her younger sister's sudden and unexpected appearance. "You place me in a very awkward predicament whether I will or will not: you must of course join my bridesmaids. I have twelve already, and thirteen I will not tolerate for a second, as you yourself must quite understand——"

She suddenly checked herself, and a cry of vexation and alarm escaped her lips.

The Counsellor was sitting with his back to the door, and in the act of pouring out a

glass of burgundy, when Flora's exclamation announced the entrance of the girls. Whether it was the suddenness of the exclamation which shook his hand, or that in raising his eyes to see who it was he did not put the glass safely on the table, no one could have said ; but the result was that the purple contents were spilled over the white table-cloth and all down the side of Flora's charming dress.

The Counsellor sprang up from his seat with pale face, wide open mouth, and staring eyes, as if he saw the spirit of a dead friend, instead of the tall rounded figure and sweet earnest face of his ward entering the room. For one moment he seemed unable to speak, the next, he had recovered his self-command, laughingly apologized to Flora for his awkwardness, rung the bell for a servant to repair the damage he had caused to the breakfast-table, and then hastened across the room to greet Kathe. Not a

trace of the rejected lover was noticeable in his manner, as he quietly shook hands with her, and uttered a few words of pleasure at seeing her back in his house. His bearing towards her made her feel at her ease immediately, for one glance at his face assured her that he had again returned to his former relation with her, that of a fatherly guardian to a young ward. Laying one hand on her shoulder, he said—

"I did not venture to send you a formal invitation, Kathe, and lately I have been so busy and occupied with other affairs, that a visit to Dresden was quite out of the question, even if I had had time to think of it. You will forgive me, if I——"

"I have come back entirely and for the sole purpose of being with Henriette now she is ill again," Kathe interrupted quickly, but without the slightest reproach in her tone for Flora's rudeness.

"That is very nice and kind of you, my

dear," remarked Madame Urach, the frown clearing from her brow, which Kathe's unexpected entrance had brought there; adding, as a perplexed look settled round her mouth—"But where are we to put you? Flora's trousseau is laid out in the room you used to occupy, and——"

"You must allow me to take possession of my own quarters, Madame; indeed I have done so already," said Kathe politely but firmly.

"I see no other alternative left open to me but to accept your proposition," replied the old lady good-humouredly. "By this evening our house will be as full as possible—every corner occupied; and even this morning we had some little difficulty to reserve this room free for our breakfast. Really I never remember seeing the house in such a terrible state of confusion. Ever since dawn men have been at work hammering, nailing——"

"And now the girls are declaiming at the top of their voices in the drawing-room, loud enough, too, to shake the balcony from its supports," Henriette remarked, with no little contempt in her voice, sitting down in an easy-chair. "As Kathe and I passed just now we overheard something about 'Pallas Athene,' the 'Rose of Cashmere,' and the newly-made bride all mixed up in verse——"

"Be quiet, Henriette!" cried Flora, clasping her hands angrily to her ears. "I think it shows great want of taste on your part to tell me beforehand of such dilettante performances, when you know how I have always excelled in acting myself; and now I shall have to sit still and say nothing, while others are making fun of and laughing at——"

Madame Urach raised her hand, and by a gesture commanded her grand-daughter to hold her tongue, for as she spoke the

young ladies entered the room, having finished their rehearsal.

Flora glided off into a tiny anteroom at the side, while Fräulein von Geise coldly greeted Kathe with the remark that she had been away during the pleasantest part of the year, after which she turned to the Counsellor, and, holding out her hand, said in affected gaiety—

"Oh, how pleasant to see you here, Herr von Römer, for now we can thank you in person for the marvellously beautiful manner in which you have seconded our efforts for to-night's amusement. It is really superb! and the decorations are beyond praise. Such fairy scenes are more fit for fairyland than this prosy every-day world: that ball-room is simply exquisitely decorated. How pleasant it must be to be so rich! Apropos of riches, have you heard the news about Major Bredon? They say he is ruined, utterly ruined!

This money panic is too alarming—first one and then another, and——"

"But Major Bredon has been speculating to a fearful extent," remarked Madame Urach softly, leaning back in her fauteuil and arranging her dress. "How could he be so mad, so utterly wanting in common sense?"

"His wife is a lovely woman, and she is the one really in fault — she has been shamefully extravagant. Why, her toilette alone has cost more than three thousand thalers a year!"

"Nonsense, my dear, that has nothing to do with their ruin, or rather it would not have mattered if her husband had been more careful about his capital; but he speculated on things that he ought to have known were mere bubbles." She shrugged her shoulders, and smiling at the Counsellor, added, "In all such matters he should have taken a business man's advice,

as I did. We are safe enough, are we not, Moriz ?"

"I believe so," he replied with laconic brevity, filling up his glass with some burgundy and drinking it off; "but I suppose few escape untouched in such a panic as the present one; here and there one loses a little—'nothing risk,' you know, 'nothing have,' but mere flea-bites which hurt no one——"

"Ah! that reminds me that I have not seen the paper to-day," broke in Madame Urach quickly, rising from her chair. "Generally I have it brought to me punctually at nine o'clock."

"Possibly an oversight on the part of the postman, grandmamma," he replied indifferently, shrugging his shoulders; "or, perhaps, yours has got mixed with mine by some mistake of the servants. I have not opened my letters yet, they are in my

rooms in the Tower. I will go and see if yours is there." He poured out another glass of burgundy and drank it off, and as he put the wine-glass back on the table he said, by way of apology for drinking so much wine, "Pardon me, ladies; but one of my headaches has just suddenly come on, and I fancy the wine may ward it off for a time. Two or three glasses of burgundy had a very happy effect on me last week, when I was attacked in a similar manner; I hope it will do the same now. Come," he added, going to the buffet, uncorking a bottle of Stein, and filling several glasses standing near, "come, ladies, my headache is better already." His face was flushed now instead of pale and drawn. "Let us drink to the success of this evening's amusements," and he handed a glass to each of the young ladies; then holding his own high in the air, he cried, "Long live youth and beauty, and may we all live

on to enjoy the happy life so pleasant to each of us just now !"

Glasses were touched all round, while Madame Urach smiled and slightly shook her head. Kathe had drawn back into the corner and stood by Henriette's couch while her guardian was pouring out the wine. He did not seem to notice her presence or that she did not join in the toast; he offered her no glass, and she did not go forward to take one; but she saw how Henriette's eyes filled with tears at the Counsellor's tactless reference to a "happy life," and how her lips quivered as the clang of the glasses fell on her ear; for life to her was anything but a pleasure, with all the suffering she had to endure, when, sometimes for weeks together, the drawing of each breath was painful almost beyond endurance.

Kathe glanced anxiously and questioningly at her guardian's excited face. She

never imagined that behind his pleasant manners and placid handsome countenance an inward struggle might be going on, the result of which even he himself dreaded; but now as she gazed at his flushing eyes and heightened colour, and noticed the convulsive movement of his lips, and the slight trembling of the hand which held the glass, and heard the forced ring of his voice, she was convinced in her own mind that something strange must have happened of which he was cognizant, and which he was anxious to conceal from those about him, or that he was ill.

The Counsellor seemed indignantly to feel the effect of Kathe's glance, for he unwillingly turned round and looked rapidly across at the corner where the two girls were, then quickly placed his glass on the table, and passing one hand over his forehead, he held on to the buffet with the other in order to steady himself from fall-

ing, for the giddiness in his head had momentarily taken possession of him again, in spite of the wine he had taken to ward it off.

CHAPTER V.

THE preparations for the amusements of the evening on the ground-floor of the Villa went on at a rapid rate, at the same time causing a noise and confusion which became almost unbearable as the afternoon advanced. The families from the surrounding neighbourhood began to arrive in quick succession, accompanied by baskets full of "theatrical things," to be donned later on by the fair occupants of the carriages. The whole of the ground-floor seemed in a hopeless state of confusion; hairdressers were hanging about the hall waiting to be

summoned to the several ladies, whose costume demanded an appropriate arrangement of their hair; maids were flying up and down to answer the bells, every one of which seemed possessed with St. Vitus's dance; gardeners were coming and going, bearing large trays of hot-house grapes and other delicacies for dessert, while the under-gardeners hurried to and fro with massive pots of bright flowers, and orange and palm trees to decorate the hall and ball-room. Footmen jostled each other in the performance of their duty in attending to the constantly-arriving guests, and in conducting the right person to the right room allotted for his or her use; and in every apartment on this same ground-floor the knocking and hammering going on was almost past endurance by those whose ill-luck it was to have to wait about in the hall.

In the midst of all this noise and confusion downstairs, upstairs in the compara-

tive quiet and seclusion of her own snug little room, Henriette had fallen into a calm deep sleep. In the outer chamber used by the invalid as a sort of boudoir, Nanni, her personal attendant, was sitting at work. With the swiftest and daintiest fingers she was sewing on to some airy stuff quantities of silver spangles, which the busy workmen downstairs were to hang in graceful festoons around the walls of the mimic stage in the ball-room.

It was about half-past four when Kathe softly opened the door, and passed from Henriette's bedroom into the boudoir. Stopping a moment to admire the deftness of the waiting-woman's fingers, she entreated her to watch her young mistress while she slept, and not to leave the room under any pretext whatever, adding—

"And if Fräulein Henriette awakes before I return, tell her I shall be back in an hour, I am only going to the Millhouse."

Avoiding the grand staircase which led to the large hall, Kathe went down a side flight of stairs, and so across a side corridor of the dining-room. For the moment it was vacant, but no sooner had Kathe quietly tripped towards the door than she saw the Counsellor emerge from a second door, also leading to the garden, with his straw hat on his head, and evidently about to sally forth to his own rooms in the Tower.

"There is no need to hurry, Anton," he was saying to his valet, who lived in the ruined Tower with his master; "I shall not dress before six, so you will have plenty of time to ride to the town and back."

Kathe's footsteps lingered, she had no wish for a private tête-à-tête with her guardian just now, and she thought that in a few moments he would have left the threshold of the door and gone out into the garden. But he stood still on the top

of the steps, with his hands in his trousers pockets and his back to the corridor, surveying the scene before him. One would think from the earnest expression on his face, and the yearning, almost pained look in his eyes, that the beautiful landscape at his feet, with its soft late afternoon gleams of sunshine lighting up every branch and tree, and casting broad shadows on the paths, was being seen by him for the last time. From one point to the other his gaze wandered slowly over the whole extent of scenery before him, and then Kathe heard him sigh gently, and saw too that his breast heaved as if under terrible emotion, and that he clenched his fist in his pocket as if striving to subdue the feelings which were overpowering him, and that then suddenly he lifted his right hand to his brow and pressed it across his eyes as he had done in the morning when the giddiness in his head had attacked him.

She hurried to his side, the rustling of her silk dress made him try to turn round to see who was there.

"You have the headache still?" she asked gently.

"Yes, it is very bad too, and I have just had another fit of giddiness," he replied in an unsteady voice, pulling his hat deeper over his brow. "I don't wonder at it either, with all this noise and commotion going on in the house. If I had had the least idea of the thousand and one worries the festivities of this evening are creating, I would have stayed away," he added presently with a steadier voice, but with still a very unnatural ring in it, that Kathe could not account for as simply caused by his headache. "The stupid workmen misunderstood all my orders during my absence, and executed every one exactly in the contrary way to my wishes, hence a week's work has had to be undone since

my arrival yesterday, and re-arranged again in the space of twelve hours. And I am afraid we shall have this knocking and hammering up to the very last moment before the curtain rises."

He walked down the steps slowly, and with the uncertain movement of a man whose vision is imperfect, he fairly reeled as he reached the ground and clutched at the iron railing for support.

"Shall I go back and fetch you a glass of seltzer-water?" asked Kathe; "or shall I send for Dr. Bruck?"

"No — no, thank you, Kathe," he answered in a strangely weak tone; but his eyes glanced at her tall, elegant figure with an eager, devouring gaze that brought the colour to his face and made him droop his eyelids for a second. "Besides, you are labouring under a grand mistake if you imagine Bruck is to be had so easily. Nothing tempts him away from his patients

in town. My firm belief is that he will have to be fetched from the bedside of a patient to go through the marriage ceremony to-morrow." A sarcastic smile flitted over his pale lips, and he added after a slight pause, "The very best remedy I have in my own hands — my cool wine cellars. I was just going over to the Tower to get the wine wanted for this evening. I think the cool, fresh air down in the cellars will do me more good, and drive away my headache much sooner than any amount of medicine; it will act like a cold-water bandage on my hot forehead."

Kathe gave a little touch to her hat to fix it more primly on her head, and moved forward down the steps.

"You are going to the Mill-house? Not any farther, I hope?" he asked, looking at his watch.

The question was simple, and asked in a careless tone; but Kathe fancied he caught

his breath while speaking, and that his eyes had a somewhat strange glance in them as he looked up for her answer.

She replied by telling him that she was going to the Mill-house to put the finishing touches to her toilette for the evening, and nodding her head gaily she turned off across the gravel walk, while the Counsellor wended his way in the opposite direction towards the Tower.

Kathe had reached the first tree beyond the pathway, when she involuntarily stood still and looked back at her guardian. He was walking over the grass with the same hesitating, unsteady gait Kathe had noticed in him once before to-day; even while she looked his knees seemed to bend beneath him, and his whole figure to tremble, and his hat was pushed to the back of his head as if he could not bear the weight of the pressure on his forehead, and again the girl saw his eyes wander with a

mournful but purposeless gaze around the park.

Suddenly an idea flashed through her brain and her face paled. That her guardian was ill she had no doubt, but was it safe for him to enter the wine-vaults in his present state alone? and she shuddered as she remembered her own feelings the day he had escorted her and her sisters to visit the cellars, and had pointed out to her the huge old-fashioned barrels of gunpowder, and her terror in case anything should occur to cause those barrels to blow up.

All these things rushed across her now, and she trembled as she quickly ran back and called out anxiously, "Moriz! Moriz! do be careful with the light in the cellars!"

Was he so deep in thought, or was he in such a nervous state, that the unexpected interruption started him beyond his control? Whichever it was he turned round with a white scared face, and mut-

tered an oath between his teeth as he replied angrily—

"What do you mean to insinuate? What? Ah! ha! have you seen a ghost in the sunshine, Kathe?" he added more in his usual tone, and apparently making a great effort to control his feelings. Then he burst into a wild mocking laugh which brought back the colour of shame to the anxious girl's cheeks, and waving his hand with a disdainful gesture, he reeled forward and disappeared with hasty steps behind the copse, and out of her sight.

In the course of half an hour Kathe had completed her errand to the Mill-house, and having an hour to spare she stole away down to the side of the river to look again upon the "dear old-fashioned house" inhabited by Dr. Bruck and his aunt. How her heart beat as she caught sight of its familiar weather-cock through the foliage of the trees, and saw the gleam of

the sun on the windows! How she started too at the sound of her own footfall as she slowly paced along the gravel pathway. She felt like an exile about to gaze for the last time on the beloved haunts of his happy days. She leaned against the trunk of a poplar tree, and silently contemplated the scene before her. Here it was that she had stood still for a moment that never to be forgotten day now three months ago, after her interview with Dr. Bruck, and looked back at the house from which she had been banished.

She had not been able to forget the picture then presented to her gaze—it seemed indelibly impressed on her mind. The wondering faces of the children as they watched her departure from their position at the side of the kitchen garden, the strong tall well-built figure of the young Doctor standing against the garden table, the open hall door through which she had caught a

glimpse of the white cap-strings of the old cook at work in the kitchen. Even the glint of the setting sun gilding the window-frames and casting golden and crimson rays on the tops of the trees behind the house.

When last she had seen these trees they were covered with fresh budding flowers, now they had their branches bent beneath the weight of their golden and rosy fruit, which the bright glistening foliage could not hide. The renowned vine was heavy with the richness of its purple produce, and the very air seemed impregnated with the sweet aroma of ripe fruit. She gave a hasty glance at the corner room, and her heart beat audibly as she did so. She knew the young Doctor was not at home, for Moriz had informed her that he was visiting his patients in town, but a second glance told her that he did not live there now. White lace curtains hung close to the window-panes, a beautiful white cat lay cosily

stretched on the window-sill between several pots of full-blown Alpine roses, over which a lady with snow-white hair was bending, evidently Auntie Diakonus's old friend, who was to live with her when her nephew was married. He had said farewell then to his home. His things were packed, and the next morning he would stand at the altar by the side of her haughty, beautiful sister, and "for better for worse till death do us part" plight his troth to her who had promised to be his, for the sole sake of the brilliant position the wife of a man of his social standing would occupy.

Kathe wept bitterly as she put her arms round the friendly poplar tree, and leant her aching head against its hard rough trunk. Her sobs increased as she thought of the poor noble lady who had drowned herself in the river, when her heart was broken and her lover had proved himself

faithless. But *she* had been loved once, even if she was forsaken for another, while poor Kathe had to confess to herself that she had not been loved at all. Then, too, the noble lady had no sin on her conscience, while on the contrary, Kathe knew that she herself was guilty at this very moment of a dull heavy pain at her heart, which might be expressed by one very ugly word, jealousy; and the one she was jealous of was her elder sister! The poor girl bowed her head, and a crimson flush mounted to the roots of her hair as she acknowledged this bitter fact to herself; the very tears she was shedding seemed to scald her cheeks, but she felt too utterly miserable to try and check them. Presently she was startled by the sound of footsteps on the path behind her. Hastily dashing her tears away, she turned to see who it was approaching. It was Franz, the foreman at the mill, who was going up

to the Tower to look over "things there a bit," he remarked in passing, as he touched his hat and slung his basket of tools tighter over his shoulder.

Not caring to be seen by any one else who might happen to pass by, with swollen eyes and dejected air so near to the house by the river, Kathe began slowly walking along the banks. She had no desire to return to the Villa just yet, there was still plenty of time for her to remain out of doors a while longer before dressing for the evening. She knew also that Henriette's toilette would take long to perform, and that the invalid girl would rather spend a couple of hours in adorning her person, than appear in society without an amount of finery on her thin emaciated figure, that heightened instead of diminishing the terrible inroads of the disease which was fast carrying her to an early grave.

Kathe lingered under the trees enjoying

the quiet and loneliness around her, and tried to subdue the longing yearning of her heart for just one glance, just one more look at the man she knew it was a sin to think about at all, for was he not to be married on the morrow to her sister ?

And while she stamped her foot in anger at her own weakness, she saw a man coming towards her from the Tower, and driving before him with a stick two small deer. He wore a thick blue workman's blouse under his coat, which was only fastened loosely over his shoulders, and his full reddish beard reached far down on his breast. The animals trotted docilely over the bridge, but the instant they were on the other side they bounded forward into the depth of the park.

Most likely Kathe would not have noticed the man—workmen were in the habit of going to and from the Tower—

if it had not been for the deer. She knew that her guardian had a great affection for these animals, and that nothing made him more angry than to find one straying from their special enclosure and wandering at large in the park; and here was this stranger driving two of the shy creatures over the river to the forbidden spot! What could it mean? Was he one of those malcontents who had sworn enmity to the family at the Villa, and openly declared that they had no just right to the luxuries and riches surrounding them? Could he be one of a small band of rebellious workmen who, as she had heard, had determined to bring down the pride of the newly-created noble, and to wrench from his grasp the wealth he had amassed?

He walked leisurely along till he reached the heavy park door, not so very far off to her right, which led on to the high-road, and taking a key from his pocket un-

fastened the lock and let himself out as coolly and deliberately as if he had been the master.

But while she watched the man's movements it suddenly occurred to Kathe that his gait and figure had a great resemblance to her guardian's, and that if he and this workman had both been in the same position in life, they might have passed for twins, as far as their height, breadth of shoulder, walk, and general appearance went, the only difference between them being that this man had fair reddish hair, while that of the Counsellor was a dark auburn, or what is commonly called brown.

Involuntarily she stood still, gazing earnestly at the spot from whence the man in the blouse had disappeared; then she slowly turned her head and contemplated the Tower on the other side of the water, and half unconsciously found

herself admiring the beautiful sweep of land in the distance, with the grand old ruined Tower standing out in bold relief against the bright green of the trees in the foreground. Suddenly the sky overhead seemed to darken, a huge flash of brilliant light dazzled her eyes, the ground beneath her trembled, and a moment after a crash as of a heavy thunderclap boomed in her ears, and she fell to the ground in a state of unconsciousness.

What was it? A moment or two later and all those who could possibly move ran out of the Villa into the garden, for the house was rocking from the effect of whatever had caused that terrible noise. Could it be an earthquake? As if turned into stone, those who had reached the open garden path gazed at each other in speechless terror, expecting with every breath they drew that the earth would yawn beneath their feet and swallow them alive

in its fearful depths. The lawn and well-kept gravel walks were fast being covered with water, which in some mysterious way appeared to have found an egress from the river-side. The air was heavy with an odour of burning, and the white scared faces of the people standing in groups here and there began to be covered with smutches of black that, by force of contrast, deepened the ashy paleness of every cheek, and the ground was gradually becoming strewn with remnants of burning stuffs and charred atoms of woodwork.

As the minutes crept on—and that one awful crash was not followed by a second, and the momentary violent trembling of the ground beneath their feet was succeeded by a stillness as terrible to those able to think, as the crash had been unexpected—one and another began to look around to see and try and understand what it was indeed that had happened. The thick

walls of the Villa were cracked from top to bottom in various places, and one side of the magnificent house appeared a complete mass of ruin. The windows were all broken, and their frames scattered about on the terrace; the huge massive mirrors in the drawing-room were shattered to atoms, and the stage in the room beyond the dining hall was partly forced through the opening of what had once been a French window. How the workmen escaped with their lives and without any injury to themselves was a question that always remained a mystery, even when the cause of the catastrophe afterwards became known.

Presently those standing about began to recover the use of their speech and limbs, and were joined by several people who had hastened to the house from the out-lying grounds. The first to utter coherent exclamations was Anton, who had just arrived from the town, and was riding up the

avenue towards the house when the fearful crash took place. His horse had reared and thrown him, but beyond a severe shake he had not been hurt, and now he came hastily forward and asked in a hoarse whisper—

"What is it? What has happened?"

"Look! look, Madame!" cried one of the servants, who, at the sound of a question from some one else's lips, seemed to recover very rapidly from his own fright. He was helping to support old Madame Urach, who, half fainting from terror, was leaning heavily against Flora. "Look, Madame, over there!" and he pointed in the direction of the park.

By this time a large number of people had assembled in front of the house, each eager to hear what it was that had happened, and at the man's loud exclamation they all turned round and looked in the direction to which he was pointing.

Thick clouds of black smoke were issuing above the trees, their density relieved every now and again by a flash of red lurid light which leapt like a gleam of lightning through the overhanging darkness.

"The gunpowder in the Tower must have exploded!" cried a voice in the crowd.

"Not possible!" replied Anton, laughing in spite of his terror at the bare idea of such an absurd thing happening. "That powder long ago lost its power of exploding, and the small quantity the master brought with him fresh from Jux was not enough to raise a stone out of its place. What nonsense you talk, man!"

But for all that he called it "nonsense" his face assumed a pallor that was not there a few moments ago, as he remembered that his master was then in his rooms over there where nothing was to be seen of the Tower for the dense columns of smoke darkening the horizon; and as the thought

rushed through his brain he turned and darted off through the park, not heeding the wet overflowing pathways, or answering the questions of the crowd who followed his footsteps as fast as their feet would carry them.

What a scene of desolation lay before them! In the space of a second the beautiful estate had been converted into a heap of black ruin! Turn which way one would all was charred, destroyed, and converted into a mass of rubbish. Scarcely a tree remained standing. On the right, the noble avenue of lindens which led from the Tower to the entrance of the neighbouring town presented an aspect of torn branches and upturned roots that was piteous to behold. Massive blocks of granite had been hurled across the road, and large pieces of half-burnt wood lay side by side with huge stones on the well-kept paths. On the other side, what had

once been the elegant palm-house was now a mere empty shed covered with thousands of broken bits of glass, and all the handsome stables and their costly occupants seemed to have disappeared under the blackened seething ruins which still cumbered the ground.

No wonder the crowd as they pressed forward held their breath with horror at the scene of devastation around them. Scarcely a trace of the grand old Tower remained! The beautiful balcony of ancient workmanship which the Counsellor had had redecorated at great cost, and which was the pride and glory of the surrounding neighbourhood, had disappeared altogether. The thick stone walls, grey and beautiful with age, were torn and rent asunder and black with smoke, and from the roof of the Tower volumes of smoke still issued, lightened every few moments by darting fork-like

fits of flame. It was impossible to approach anywhere near the burning mass for fear of some falling stone or heavy buttress that dashed itself to the ground with renewed force from time to time.

"My poor master!" murmured Anton, stretching out his hands towards the burning ruins, which were fast becoming one immense yawning cavern, containing nothing but smoke and the charred remains of what had once been the Counsellor's luxurious and costly apartments.

Round about the base of the Tower, water was gurgling and splashing against the stone walls, and covering the ground as far as to the opposite side of the park. The same shock which had destroyed the Tower and desolated the whole estate, had burst the bonds of the river and caused it to overflow its banks, and as it sank back into its deep bed after a few moments' agitation it carried with it sand and roots,

and wounded doves, and masses of broken articles of every description.

Every moment brought fresh faces to the ruins, but what could they do? The fire-engines from the neighbouring town were quickly on the spot, but help was too late, everything was lost, there was nothing to save. Who would be foolish enough to expect to rescue exquisite furniture, costly sculpture, famous pictures, rich carpets, or carved ornaments from that burning crater? One rich crimson silk curtain had caught on a lower portion of one of the walls and hung there like a great spot of blood from a gigantic wound.

And while they stood there watching the burning ruins, the people began to whisper among each other of concealed treasures, of gold and silver hoarded up within the vast caves of that blackened ruin. Yet no, it was not money but money's worth, some one remarked, who appeared, from the ex-

pression on his face, of a more intelligent turn of mind than many others there present; papers of enormous value, securities, mortgages, and such like things which had been placed inside those once massive walls, and hidden in heavy old-fashioned iron chests, knowing that there they would be safer than in any bank. Where were they now? Where were the walls which had formerly protected them? It was useless to ask, all was engulphed in that frightful yawning cavern, or scattered in a thousand useless fragments to the four winds.

What, too, had become of the master of all this enormous wealth, who, according to Anton's statement, had entered the Tower about an hour previous to the catastrophe for the purpose of drawing wine for the evening's feast? Many a blanched face peered hopelessly into the burning embers holding their breath, while the faithful

body-servant bemoaned his master's loss, and every now and again rent the air with a piercing call on his master's name, running hither and thither, now calling over the water, then raising his voice still louder with a despairing accent of entreaty as if the Counsellor were there and needed coaxing to be persuaded to leave the ruins.

"How could any one be so foolish as to enter a vault with a light in his hand, where gunpowder in large quantities was kept?"

"But that historical gunpowder could not have exploded of itself—it had been there too many hundred years; some more must have been added to the old," remarked one of the bystanders in a loud voice, an engineer too, who was known to most of the crowd present as a man able to speak with the authority of knowledge and learning.

"Then how the devil did it get into the vault?" asked Anton, standing still for a

moment and eyeing the speaker with suspicion, his haggard face looking still more haggard and worn, with the fresh idea of doubt and suspicion raised by the engineer's manner visible in his countenance.

The gentleman did not reply, but shrugged his shoulders, and drew back out of the way of the fire-engine water-pipes, which had begun to work on the side near him. Engine after engine arrived in answer to the summons from the bell in the nearest church tower, but too late to rescue things from destruction, so several of the men left off applying the water-pipes and gave a helping hand to raising a new temporary bridge over the river in place of the old one which had been completely blown away.

Presently a wild cry arose from the midst of the crowd around the ruined Tower. Not very far from the spot where the men were at work on the bridge, the body of

Franz, the foreman at the mill, was discovered lying mangled and dead, half concealed by a large stone which had evidently fallen upon him when the explosion took place and crushed him.

Madame Urach heard the cry from a bench under the trees in the garden, where she had sunk down exhausted and frightened, after escaping from the house when the shock took place. She had been unable to move a step farther, she seemed thoroughly unnerved, and to have no power to understand even what had happened.

The cry raised by the people near the Tower seemed to rouse her, she tried to get up, but her limbs refused to obey.

"Moriz, have they found him?" she murmured as one in a dream. Then making a great effort she asked, "Have they seen him? Listen, Flora! listen to that cry; he is not dead, is he, dear?" she

demanded as she seized hold of her granddaughter's arm, who was standing near her, and looked up piteously in her face.

It was a sad scene that Flora gazed round upon in her usual haughty manner. In the distance over the trees clouds of black smoke circled up to the sky; in the park, under the trees, the ground was flooded with the overflowing river; and near at hand, in the large open space in front of the Villa, thousands of broken pieces of glass strewed the lawn, over which hung the balcony filled with beautiful flowers, rich sweet orange trees, and bright coloured plants, perhaps the only part of the house which had entirely escaped injury. At the bottom of the lawn several small streams of water, supplied from the constantly playing water-pipes, had formed themselves into a miniature lake, which was muddy and dark-coloured from the sand and other floating débris mixing with each

stream as it passed over the ground, and joined the others in this sloping portion of the estate. Not one of the trimly-kept garden-paths was visible to the eye, even the far-famed avenue of linden trees was littered from one end to the other with torn branches, blackened fragments of granite, and upturned roots of trees. In the midst of this desolating scene Flora stood robed in white, with white flowers in her golden hair, her cheeks and lips as white as her dress, and her demeanour as calm and collected as though she were gazing on a scene of ordinary interest, instead of on the complete ruin and destruction of everything the family possessed in the world.

Her lip curled indignantly at the visible sign of weakness in her aged grandmother, who had always impressed upon her granddaughters the worldly wisdom of never, under any trying circumstances, losing their

self-possession, and now seemed utterly helpless herself in the confusion reigning around her. Why need Flora trouble about a few panes of broken glass, or the blowing up of an old ruin that her brother-in-law had fitted up at great cost, and made habitable for himself and servant? On the morrow she would start on her new career as the wife of the most celebrated physician of the Court; it was tiresome, certainly, that all this strange tumult, the grave results of which she had not as yet cared to inquire into, should have occurred on the eve of her wedding, but——

"I wish you would let go my arm, grandmamma!" she said impatiently, in answer to the old lady's eager questioning respecting her grandson-in-law's safety. "I think you must have lost your wits, and fancy you see phantoms. Why need Moriz have met with an accident? Bah! what an idea! he, too, who is always so lucky!

I am perfectly convinced that he is as safe and well as I am, giving orders to those thoughtless servants who seem to have completely forgotten our assistance, and who are screaming and flying about down there as if they were mad, and I have no doubt do not see their master a yard off. I must go and see what they are making such a noise about." She glanced over the wet lawn and still more flooded garden-path, and then at her light shoes, but after a second's hesitation she lifted her tarlatan skirt with a despairing shrug of the shoulders, and said :

" I dare say they will think I have lost my wits also, but I must go."

" No, no ; you shall do nothing of the kind, you remain with me," cried Madame Urach in a beseeching tone, catching at the folds of Flora's dress and holding her back. " You surely don't mean to be so heartless as to leave me alone with Hen-

riette, who is more helpless than I am, and cannot stir herself, poor child. O God! I shall die, I think. If he is dead—if—ah, what then?" and the poor old lady drooped her head on her bosom covered with sparkling diamonds, and seemed to have aged in appearance twenty years since the morning. Her yellow satin dress was a strange contrast to her ashen-grey face and decrepit attitude.

Henriette had cowered down at her grandmother's feet, her face as pale as her sister's, while her large eyes wandered from one side of the scene of desolation to the other, as she constantly muttered:

"Kathe! where is Kathe?" and her lips trembled and the words were spoken as if it were a lesson repeated by rote.

"Good gracious me! I shall lose my patience soon," Flora murmured between her teeth. "It is terrible to be thus hampered with such helpless women.

Really, Henriette, I must entreat you to cease that eternal moan for your Kathe. No one will steal her from you, no fear of that."

With increasing impatience she glanced up at the house to see if there was any one at hand to take her place, and stay by her grandmother and sister while she followed out her inclination and walked over to the Tower to hear what had really happened. But not a human being was within calling distance. Every one had gone off to the Tower, visitors, footmen, servants, even dainty lady's-maids had tucked up their petticoats and waded through the rushing water across the park, to the scene of the disaster. Turning her head in the direction opposite to the one leading from the town, she saw two or three ladies, who were to take part in the private theatricals of the evening, coming towards the spot where she stood.

"For God's sake, tell us what has happened!" cried the foremost young lady, as she neared the group.

Flora shrugged her shoulders.

"There has been an explosion in the Tower, that is all we know at present. Every one has gone mad, no one will give a lucid answer, and here am I tied to this spot because grandmamma has lost her head, and in her exaggerated anxiety about Moriz is tearing my skirts from off my body. She has taken it into her head that he is blown up too."

The young girls seemed to turn into stone at this terrible conjecture, and at the heartless cold-blooded manner in which it was uttered. That the handsome, healthy man who had so gaily challenged them to drink to the toast of a "long happy life" not a couple of hours ago could be reduced to a mass of fragments was a fact they could not realize at a moment's notice.

They were too horrified to utter a sound, and all Fräulein von Giese could bring her lips to pronounce was a feeble

"Impossible!"

"Impossible? you say impossible?" exclaimed Madame Urach with an hysterical laugh and a sigh as she rose to her feet, and while tottering as if drunk, pointed in the direction of the park. "There! there they are bringing him! My God! my God! Moriz! Moriz!"

A group of people were advancing towards the house carrying a form on a stretcher improvised for the occasion, in the midst of whom Dr. Bruck's tall figure could be distinctly seen. He was without his hat, and his face was very pale.

Flora sprang forward while her grandmother burst into a flood of tears. As soon as they recognized the white-robed bride-elect, and divined her errand in thus hurrying towards them, the men who

were carrying the stretcher drew back and allowed her to step to the side of the motionless figure on the board. One glance sufficed for her purpose, and then she in her turn drew back and cried out to her grandmother :

"Be comforted, grandmamma! It is not Moriz."

"Then it is Kathe — I knew it was," murmured Henriette in an awed whisper that sounded as if it came from beneath the ground, so hollow and unnatural was the tone of her voice.

And she was right. It was Kathe who was lying on the plank, her clothes dripping with wet, and her head supported by soft pillows taken from the Doctor's study. But for the linen bandage on her head and a few drops of blood on her left cheek one might have supposed she was asleep, her lids were closed so naturally, and her hands lay so unconstrainedly on her lap.

"What has happened to Kathe, Leo? How on earth did she get wounded in the explosion? What did she want down there at all?" asked Flora stooping over the prostrate figure, and evincing far more anger than sorrow at her young step-sister's misfortune or accident, whichever it might turn out to be.

The young Doctor's face flushed scarlet at his betrothed's first question, but he controlled himself, and pressing his lips firmly together made no attempt to answer, and looked past her to the spot where Henriette was crouching down too horrified and terror-stricken to move.

But the sound of Flora's voice seemed to bring back her scattered senses, she rose from her huddled-up position, and, holding the Doctor's arm, she whispered as well as her short breathing would let her—

"Only one word, Leo, is she alive?" and her large eyes looked imploringly up

into his as she tightened her grasp on his arm.

"Yes, the fresh air and loss of blood have saved her; the only danger now is from her wet clothes. Thank God the wound on her head is not dangerous," he replied with a deep sigh of intense relief, and he put his arm gently and kindly round the weak girl's waist and half carried her up to the house, after he had ordered the bearers of Kathe's lifeless form to precede him.

The crowd followed for a few steps farther, then quietly dropped off one by one to return to the more exciting scene of the disaster. Madame Urach, who had scarcely recovered sufficiently from her anxiety about the Counsellor to take much heed to what was going on around her, allowed herself to be led back to the house without any open remonstrance. The girls who were to have joined in the

theatricals followed behind, watching with wondering eyes the young Doctor's behaviour, who appeared to be unable to notice anything but Kathe's fainting form. Still holding Henriette round the waist, he walked by the side of the stretcher with his free hand laid gently on Kathe's forehead to judge if the movement of the bearers was causing her any pain. The usually shy reserved man, who lately had been graver and more reserved in manner than before, watched each breath of the wounded girl with a tender solicitude and all-absorbing gaze, as if she were all the world to him, as if the dearest and best beloved being the earth and life contained for him had just been rescued from death by his preserving hand.

Flora followed behind silently and alone, as if she had no relationship with the three figures forming the centre of the group in advance. Her feet and skirts were wet,

and the latter trailed along the damp gravel pathway, becoming dirtier and heavier with each step, but she took no heed of anything. With a sudden rash movement she snatched the wreath of daisies she wore in her hair from her head, and mechanically tore them to shreds with her fingers as if angry at the irony of fate which had brought her into such a strange position, in a toilette that was intended to adorn her person at the moment of her greatest triumph in life.

She also appeared wrapped in her own thoughts, and noticed no one as she slowly walked along but the tall imposing figure of her lover. She waited from moment to moment expecting him to turn round and come to her side, but she was doomed to disappointment, and she followed on step by step with an eager angry light in her eyes, till they reached the threshold of the door. Her grandmother spoke to her, but

she did not appear to hear; she turned neither to the right nor the left, took no heed of those who pressed around her, but with that same angry gleam in her eyes which was there in the park, followed her lover up the steps, into the hall, even as far as the first floor, and into the room where Kathe, still unconscious, was gently laid down on a bed by the young Doctor's strong arms.

CHAPTER VI.

THE night which succeeded to this day of horrors was one long anxious vigil for every one in the Villa. No one went to bed, the gas was kept lighted in all the rooms, the servants went about on tip-toe or stood whispering in groups in various corners, and each time the night-watchman's step was heard tramping on the gravel path, or a door upstairs was softly opened, every one of them would start and run to the hall door hoping and expecting against hope that it was the master's arrival; but the night wore away and the morning light

dawned through the windows—and still he did not come.

The sun rose clear and bright, and shone unimpeded into every room on that side of the house, for no one had thought over night of drawing curtains and pulling down blinds before glassless window places, now glistening on a million of broken pieces of mirror strewing the floor in one apartment, and then flashing golden rays across the decorated ball-room, now a complete mass of ruin, kissing the crimson velvet of the canopy into a glorious flush of colour, and warming the pale tints of the orange-blossoms of the bridal dress through the rosy gauze of an overhanging festoon.

The velvet, and gold, and silver decorations, rare Venetian glass and luscious fruit, were lying side by side in the dining-room in hopeless confusion. One shock, and the fairy scene had been changed into a tangled heap of fragments that was

piteous to behold. Verses were left unspoken, and in the room where golden-winged angels were to have uttered high-sounding praises of the queen of the evening, and fairy feet were to have flitted through the mazes of the bridal dance, the cold morning wind moaned through the broken walls, and rattled the fragments of the window-sills to and fro in restless monotonous impatience.

It was perhaps this morning for the first time since the Villa had owned a master, that the sun had been able to peep unabashed through the unclosed shutters, and wander in free delight to every corner of the large and costly furnished room belonging to Madame Urach, stopping to play for a moment round about the silk curtains of her carved bed before darting to the other side, and dancing over the amber skirts, and flashing a thousand brilliant lights from the diamond neck-

lace the old lady still wore round her throat.

With loose cap-strings and dishevelled hair, and torn lace, Madame Urach rose and slowly began pacing up and down the floor. She was aged, older in reality than those people supposed her to be who merely saw her dressed of an evening, and yet the one thought which occupied her mind now had occupied it all night, to the exclusion of everything else, and which had excited her to such a degree that sleep had been out of the question ; this one thought, framed in coherent words, was, " Who was the Counsellor's heir ?" She was aware that she herself had no claim to anything that could be saved from the general wreck, not even to the bed on which she slept, or to the cup from which she drank.

The Counsellor had been early left an orphan, and, as far as she knew, he had not a relative in the world, unless a poor sister

of his mother's, whom he had often assisted, was alive still. Would she be his heir? He had no children, and if this poor, obscure person, who had helped to support herself by sewing to eke out the miserable pittance her unfortunate husband had contrived to leave behind him—if she were to become heiress to all this colossal wealth, then it would be very hard, very hard indeed for the old lady and her granddaughters in the future. For Madame Urach, and Flora, and Henriette were only relatives by marriage to the rich Counsellor, and having no claim to his property, he having died without a will, they would be forced to leave the luxury around them, and go and live in an obscure lodging on very straitened means. The old lady shuddered as she reflected that she might be forced to go without softly-lined carriages and high-bred horses; that she would no longer be waited upon by finished

servants, or be able to tempt her failing appetite with all the delicacies of the season, and that the princely entertainments she had so long presided over would take to themselves wings and fly away.

Two or three of the gentlemen living in the neighbourhood had remained with the old lady till midnight the previous evening, and although this same vexed question had not been referred to in plain terms, yet the conversation had naturally fallen on the consequences likely to accrue from the loss of the many valuable papers and documents known to have been placed in the strong boxes in the Tower, and of which not one shred or fragment could be found, or even expected to be found among the ruins.

But, even if the bulk of the Counsellor's immense fortune had been blown into the air, would not the contents of the Villa itself realize a sum of considerable value?

The house had been shaken, and most of

the glass destroyed by the shock of the explosion, but the iron room had not suffered, and that room contained the costly silver which in itself was a small fortune. Besides the most valuable of the horses, the half dozen thorough-breds, whose quarters were on the side of the Villa farthest from the Tower, had received so little damage, in fact had scarcely felt the effect of the explosion at all; and they would sell for a sum worthy of a king's ransom. And the pictures and other works of art—all, all would realize a sufficient fortune to enable Madame Urach to enjoy to the end of her life the luxuries she was accustomed to, if only she could prove that the same blood ran in her veins as in her late grandson-in-law's, Herr von Römer!

The conversation had also turned on Kathe, who was lying upstairs in Henriette's room.

The papers concerning her enormous

fortune had also been kept in the Tower, and the gentlemen had spent some little time in discussing the probabilities of its complete loss—but Madame Urach had paid no attention to that part of the con versation; what did it matter to her that the Castle miller's ill-reputed wealth had disappeared?—all she thought of was, "Who was Moriz's heir in point of law?" And when she retired to her room the same question revolved in her mind, to the exclusion, as we have already said, of every other thought or interest.

And Flora? Late on the previous evening she had crossed the upper corridor and descended the grand staircase, with anger and bitter vexation expressed on her beautiful face. To her deep and intense indignation she had been forced to play the part of a person who was not wanted in the so-called "sick-room" upstairs. Besides Henriette, who had curled herself on a sofa

and obstinately refused to leave Kathe's presence till consciousness returned, "Auntie" Diakonus had taken quiet possession of the room, and installed herself as head nurse. She had been obliged to seek shelter at the Villa, for the house by the river-side had been terribly shattered by the explosion, and the south wall so undermined, besides the roof being completely blown off, that it would not have been safe for a human being to remain in it. Fortunately she and her friend were far away on the high-road when the shock took place, and the maid was in the garden out of reach of falling stones, or perhaps all three would have met their death by the falling of the roof and the breaking in of the south wall.

Early in the evening the young Doctor had sent for his aunt, told her to request her friend and their servant to seek a night's lodging at the Mill-house, and begged her

to send one of the watchmen to guard the house, while she herself came and attended to Kathe, who would require tender and careful nursing for the next twenty-four hours. She had obeyed her nephew's direction and then taken up her position at the head of Kathe's bed, to wait and watch for the return of consciousness, weeping bitter tears the while. Every now and then she broke out into half-stifled expressions of fear that the "apple of her eye" would never recover from the effects of a wound on her head, in spite of the young Doctor's constant assurance that if she were only kept quiet in a few hours she would open her eyes and recognize those around her.

On the other side of the bed, Dr. Bruck sat on a chair holding Kathe's hand, which he quietly laid on the sheets each time he thought it necessary to change the cold water bandage on her head. Such an amount of attention to and interest in the

grand-daughter of a woodcutter's daughter irritated Flora beyond endurance. The gentle whisperings between "auntie" and nephew, regardless of her presence, made her so indignant with the latter, added to the persistent way in which he ignored her very existence near him in the room, that she proudly retired, and sought the shelter of her own apartments wherein to vent her anger and rage unobserved.

She, like the rest of the excited household, had no thought of going to bed. She changed her white tulle dress for a becoming dressing-gown of cashmere and gold, put her cold feet into dainty velvet embroidered slippers, and threw herself down on the sofa to try and calm her excited nerves with an hour's sleep.

Although her favourite room had miraculously escaped all damage from the explosion but one cracked pain of glass, the apartment was in a state of confusion from

one end to the other. The ebony writing-table was strewn with odds and ends of papers, and every drawer open and empty. Packages of various kinds were lying on the carpet; books had been taken from their places on the shelves, and were piled in careless disorder in one corner of the room, evidently waiting to be packed in the empty cases near at hand. The usual soft-tinted light of her crystal lamp was missing from the room, and on the table stood a bronze bracket of wax candles, which one of the servants had hastily placed there, the flickering, uncertain light of which seemed to add to the confusion in the elegant but untidy apartment.

When the morning sun had risen high enough to penetrate the recesses of her room, Flora rose from her recumbent position, extinguished the candles, and sent a message to Dr. Bruck to the effect that she wished to see him. Five minutes

later she heard his firm tread crossing the hall. She gave one hasty glance at herself in the glass, arranged a stray curl under the lace cap she had placed on her head, and then laid her pale marble-looking face on the red cushion of the sofa, drew her cashmere dressing-gown closer around her, and anxiously gazed at the door through which her lover would enter.

He opened the door, and there was something in his quiet, dignified manner which she had never noticed before, and which made her involuntarily rise from the sofa to greet him, as if he had been a stranger whom she had never seen before.

"I am not well, Leo," she began, hesitatingly, unable to withdraw her gaze from the pale, handsome face before her, which seemed to have gained a new beauty of expression since she last saw it, that she could not quite understand. "My head aches, and I think that yesterday's excite-

ment and my feet getting wet have given me a chill, and made me feverish," she added, as he looked at her with the calm scrutinizing gaze of a physician.

The calm look irritated her, her face flushed, and her lips trembled with the effort she made to control her feelings, as she said—

"Take care what you are doing, Leo! I have been very patient for these last three or four months, during which you have been so wrapped up in your patients that you have had no time to spend with me at all." Shrugging her shoulders, she went on: "But then, I suppose, that will be my fate; and I am prepared to submit to seeing very little of you, and I comfort myself by knowing that the more devoted you are to your profession, the greater the fame attaching to the name I am to bear." And she turned her head slightly from one side to the other, as if she already saw

before her the chief portion of the society over which she was to shed the lustre of her future husband's fame. Scarcely noticing the colour which mounted to his brow, she continued: "But the moment there is anything the matter with me, I protest strongly against your outside patients being considered first. We are all more or less suffering from this fearful explosion, and—poor me!—I had to comfort and sustain grandmamma and Henriette into the bargain, while half dead with fright myself—they were both as helpless as babies. And yet you have not once thought it worth while to inquire how I bear the shock we had yesterday."

"I did not inquire, because I knew you to have such control over your feelings, that you would not have allowed any such weakness to overtake you as to be frightened under the circumstances; and then it only required one glance at your

face to convince me that your nerves and body were as sound and undisturbed as usual."

The tone of his voice was the same as ever--quiet, ringing, and deep; but the beautiful woman noticed that his breath came quickly and with difficulty, as if his heart were beating faster than usual.

"You are wrong in your latter surmise, for my temples are throbbing and my nerves are upset; but you are right as regards the first. I never lose control over my feelings; or, if I do, I recover them as quickly as possible, so as to be in a fit state to act with some amount of reason. If I may judge, however, from your tone, you do not seem to admire that quality in me, although you ought to be glad I possess it to-day of all days in the year, especially when I tell you that I have never allowed myself to be persuaded into speculating with the capital of the solid but

small fortune papa left me. If I had been in the habit of letting my feelings run away with my discretion when I was in Moriz's rooms at the Tower, I should stand before you to-day a penniless bride—my portion would have shared the fate of the rest of the paper-fortune, and have been blown up. Don't look so shocked, Leo," she added, lowering her voice; "I have not been duped, and I call things by their right names. Grandmamma is tearing about upstairs, and wringing her hands, because this princely estate is likely to pass out of her hands into a stranger's. Our amiable guests have been bemoaning and bewailing the fate of Dame Fortune's favourite child in such a tragic death, till I left the drawing-room late last night in disgust, for I say that yesterday's theatrical departure from this world had been arranged for some time. Yes, you may stare; but there was a whisper afloat

yesterday among the workmen that Moriz's affairs were in a desperate condition, and very shortly—perhaps even to-day—the whisper might have been changed into certainty, and our merchant prince, the noble Counsellor, proclaimed not only a dishonourable speculator, but a villain!"

It would be impossible to describe in words the tone and manner with which this terrible assertion was made by the beautiful woman; she had risen from her sofa and was standing in the centre of a crimson carpet, the soft white draperies of cashmere falling around her, the sunlight heightening the golden tint of her hair, and with one hand outstretched to give force to her words; the same attitude, indeed, in which she had stood long months ago, when, in reply to the Counsellor's defence of Dr. Bruck's surgical skill, she had said: "I am not so weak as to hide his faults to myself."

Flora was right when she said that she liked to call things "by their right names." She had just put into plain words the thought that had vaguely haunted Dr. Bruck's mind since yesterday, a thought that he would have shrunk from accepting as possible, even within the secret recesses of his own heart, and it pained him excessively to hear from those womanly lips in hard undisguised terms, a truth which it would have been better and kinder to have left untold. The generosity inherent in the man's nature resented with silent scorn the unwelcome boast that she, the petted and spoiled sister-in-law, "had not been duped" by the Counsellor's extravagance and lavishness in the preparations for her wedding.

"I am unfortunate this morning in the choice of my words," she went on after a momentary pause in a half-sarcastic, half-conciliatory tone, as she went towards him,

he having turned off to the window without answering her. "Everything I say seems to displease you. Perhaps I have spoken out a little too plainly for your sensitive feelings, and you think that I might have spared his memory the reproach, considering the kindness he had conferred on me?" Shrugging her shoulders and raising her brows she added: "It may be so, but then you see I am a sworn enemy to the weakness of trying to gloss over faults that are patent to every one who has a grain of sense; besides, I have sufficient reason for being angry and indignant with Moriz. Henriette is as poor as a church-mouse, he speculated with every penny of her income; and Kathe? you may rest assured that not a farthing of her enormous fortune will be found."

"Thank God!" exclaimed the young Doctor under his breath, with a deep sigh of satisfaction, while his face was momen-

tarily suffused with crimson, and he smiled softly to himself.

Quietly as the words had been uttered, Flora's quick ear caught them.

"Thank God?" she repeated with no little astonishment depicted on her countenance, smiling and clasping her hands together. "I confess I am not remarkably attached to my young half-sister, but what has she done to you that you rejoice in such a strange fashion over her misfortune?"

He bit his under lip in vexation, pressed his forehead against the cool pane of glass before him, and did not reply, while she gazed out into the garden and watched the sunlight gleam on the stone nymph of the fountain.

"Kathe will not be as badly off as Henriette after all," resumed Flora thoughtfully; the mill and Mill-house belong to her and they are worth something, and the former

will bring her in a nice little income yearly. She can go and live there as soon as matters are settled here, and I should think that Henriette's best plan will be to live with her; the two are very fond of each other, and the poor consumptive girl would be a terrible drag on grandmamma. I can't imagine a better arrangement, can you? I should not dream of burdening you in our new home with such an invalid as Henriette. Kathe will be her best protector and nurse, and she shall go to her;" suddenly clasping her hands round his arm she looked up tenderly in his face and said, "Ah, Leo, how I shall thank God when you and I are married by-and-by, and we drive away this afternoon together, leaving all this confusion and sorrow behind."

With a passionate movement and a sternness of expression that she had never seen before in his face, the young Doctor wrenched his arm from Flora's grasp and

said in the hoarse voice of deep emotion :

"Would you really have the heart to leave your family helpless and alone at such a terrible time as this? Go then, where you will, I shall remain here."

"Leo!" she cried, then became speechless with the bitterness of her mortification as she saw that he was in earnest. She put her hand to her heart as if she had received a stab in the side, and bit her pale lips to keep the angry words which she was tempted to speak, unuttered. "You surely are not aware yourself of the import of your rash words," she said presently in a compressed tone. "I only notice them at all in order to point out to you that unless we start on our wedding tour to-day, as was originally intended, before the news of this terrible misfortune gets abroad—and no one will be inclined to blame us for accepting our happiness an hour or two earlier than the

hour fixed for the ceremony—we shall be obliged to defer the marriage for an indefinite time."

He was silent, even morose, as he stood a short way from her as if turned into granite. This silent immobility irritated her, and as the seconds ticked on and still he uttered no sound, her large grey eyes flashed with anger, and her lips quivered with passion.

"I have already told you that I am prepared to give up a great deal to the demands of your patients on your time, but remember this, Leo, I will not submit to the mere caprice of any other ladies. I neither care nor wish to understand why you think I ought to remain here, and go through all the trouble and annoyance of winding up affairs here with grandmamma and Henriette, when I can retire to the charming quiet and comfort of the home you have promised me. Surely you do not expect me

to make such a sacrifice? Besides, does it lie in my power to alter the pass things have come to? Of course not; why then need you suggest anything so disagreeable? Do you wish me also to become an object for pity? No, no, a thousand times no; rather than subject myself to that, I would prefer leaving the house on foot."

She began pacing the room with excitement; after taking perhaps a dozen turns she stopped suddenly, still waiting for him to speak, but he was still silent. Then knitting her brow she went on—

"You have not given me the slightest reason for your staying here, as you say you intend doing. You cannot plead the need for your presence upstairs in the sick-room. Henriette was to have been left in any case, and as to Kathe, after your statement yesterday that the wound on her head was not dangerous, you cannot declare now that she requires your con-

stant and continued care. To tell the truth I could scarcely refrain from laughing last evening at the enormous fuss you and your aunt were making over Kathe. That Henriette, who is ill and nervous, should shed childish tears over a few drops of blood I can understand; but that you, Leo, should condescend to treat the strong robust descendant of a woodcutter, as tenderly as if she had been a born——"

She checked herself suddenly, as Dr. Bruck quietly turned round and raised his hand warningly to stop what she was saying. She laughed bitterly.

"Do you think I am afraid of you? I tell you that I reply to that very unbecoming movement of your hand by an answering warning, and say, Take care what you are at, Leo; I have not yet said the irrevocable 'Yes' at the altar. I have it still in my power to withdraw if I choose, and place you in the uncomfortable position of

a forsaken bridegroom. I repeat again what I said just now, that the absurd fuss you made over Kathe yesterday vexed me excessively. Won't the world laugh at me, if you pay as much care and attention to her as if she were a princess, and——"

"No, Flora, not as to a princess, but to the darling of my heart, my first and only love," he said in his deep ringing voice, not so much to her as to himself.

She started as if the earth had suddenly opened at her feet, an ashy pale colour blanched her cheeks, and involuntarily raising her hands, she stood rooted to the spot with astonishment.

Not a muscle of his face moved as he stood before *her;* he also raised his hands, but he made no attempt to draw nearer.

"That which I have hitherto succeeded in hiding within my own heart, because I felt it was a wrong towards you, and a

false shame made me feel I was morally weak in the matter, I must now confess openly to you. I know now, and God only knows how I have struggled against it, that I have passionately loved Kathe from the very first moment I saw her," his voice shook, and he slightly turned his head to the window away from her.

Flora let her hands fall to her side. Unexpected and startling as the position was in which she was placed, she could not believe her ears had heard aright. Recovering the self-possession she had momentarily lost, she felt vexed with herself for having evinced any sign of astonishment or fear.

She had often enough in former days flirted with her partners at balls, and accepted with a smiling pleased countenance the homage they were only too willing to pay to the beautiful woman whose love-

liness of face and form had captivated their hearts, and it had many a time happened that she had laughed at and unmercifully dismissed with a taunt, the man whose heart she had won and then broken, if such a thing as a broken heart exists, when he urged his suit or pleaded that she had led him to believe she cared for him. But that a man should dare to flirt with *her*, and then break his word, was simply impossible! The very idea was absurd, no one in town would believe it, and she herself last of all.

Much more likely that Dr. Bruck had at last summoned up courage to revenge himself a little for all she had made him suffer. She knew she had tried him to the farthest point of neglect that even she dared to venture upon, that she had hinted to him not half an hour ago he was not to be sure of her till the final "Yes" had irrevocably been uttered, and this had so vexed and

annoyed him, so she thought to comfort herself, that he determined to punish her by making her jealous. And her inborn vanity and frivolous nature kept her blind for a few moments longer to the bitterest delusion of her life. Curling her lips and crossing her arms she said cuttingly—

"Ah, indeed! the very first moment. Then that must have been the moment she entered the hall like a peasant, her shoes all covered with dust, and that very Arcadian-looking bundle, tied up in her handkerchief, hanging on her arm. Was it so?"

She might have seen, had she chosen, how each one of her scoffing words made his blood boil, and how it hurt him that she could thus make fun of a feeling which had cost so many hours of hard struggling with himself before he could make up his mind to inform her of the fact at all. But he subdued his rising anger. The ques-

tion which concerned them both so closely must be discussed between them : that it should be done in a manner worthy of respect, was his to decide.

" I had accompanied her to the Villa. I saw her first at the Mill-house," he replied, after a momentary hesitation.

Flora's cheeks flushed crimson with surprise, her eyes glittered, and she bit her lip.

" Ah, indeed ! Now I begin to understand. And our simple-minded little—sneak was interested in keeping that fact to herself. A fair beginning, I acknowledge !" she laughed aloud. " Well, what next, Leo ?" she asked, folding her arms tighter across her bosom, and stamping her foot impatiently on the ground.

" The tone you think fit to adopt, Flora, leaves me no other alternative than to address you on the subject in writing," he said coldly, anxious to avoid a scene ; and,

scarcely feeling able to master his indignation, he moved towards the door.

She sprang forward and barred his passage.

"For heaven's sake, don't be so in earnest, Leo! I was merely playing a part of your own comedy. So you wish to wage a pen-and-paper war with me? My dear Leo, you will be worsted if you do. Let me warn you in time not to attempt any such thing, however much practice you may have had in writing prescriptions."

The smile she had forced to her lips died away as she encountered the sombre and stern expression depicted on his face. For the first time she began to comprehend that he might be in earnest—bitter earnest; not in his declared love for her young step-sister—that was an utter impossibility—but in his determination to break off his engagement to her at the last moment rather than put himself in the life-

long position of being obliged to submit to her caprices and heartless behaviour. Her bosom heaved as the thought passed through her mind; but she still clutched wildly at the hope that he would not dare to mortify her in the eyes of the world by any such decided step. She glanced again at his face, set her teeth, and then said haughtily, as she moved aside to allow him to pass.

"Go, Dr. Bruck! The look you gave me a moment ago is more than I choose to submit to. Go, I beg of you. I will not move my little finger to keep you; no, nor utter one syllable to ask you to stay." Bursting into a mocking peal of laughter, she added, "Men are noble creatures, certainly! There was a time, not so many months ago, when I went on my knees and begged for my freedom to be given back to me; but it was refused, and I was caught more firmly in the net, held faster

than ever by the chain which linked us together. Now see and learn what a poor weak woman's soul is capable of—pride——"

"It was pride which made me deaf to your prayer for freedom—indomitable pride—but a very different thing to the mixture of self-consolation and anger that you exhibit and call pride," he interrupted, in a quiet, masterful tone and manner, although he had not a trace of colour left in his face. "I acknowledge that I was wrong—very wrong—to indulge it, and I will make no attempt to palliate my fault by empty apologies, or to defend my actions by pointing out to you your own shortcomings. What I did then was the result of a certain boast I had unwittingly made a law to myself, that I, by pure strength of will, could accomplish whatever I had set before me to do; that if once I had made up my mind a thing should be, I would

allow no obstacle to stand in the way of its fulfilment. I would not give you back your freedom for this same reason; also because I considered that, having once passed your word to be my wife, you were bound to eternity to keep it, as I, on my side, was bound to keep my faith with you. I never broke my word in my life. I had promised to marry you, and that promise had to be kept; and from this point of view I regarded our betrothal as sound and binding for life, as the Catholics regard marriage vows. I will not deny that this was a remnant of my student days' enthusiasm. That evening you begged for our engagement to be broken. When you informed me that you had no affection for me, that you hated me—I told you in reply that I would not give you back your freedom, because I had no intention of joining the ranks of those whom you had harnessed to your triumphant car of victory over

men's hearts in order to prove the fascination of your beauty, and then be left on the road to die when you grew weary of your triumph. I confess again, that this was not right of me; because in acting as I did, it is not so much the honour of the man which is compromised by the results of such conduct, as that of the woman."

She turned away with a burning flush on her cheek, and began drumming with her fingers on the table. For a moment her bosom heaved, certainly not with emotion or sorrow for the loss of the lover, the only one of the numerous admirers for whom she ever felt the slightest approach to affection, but with mortified pride. After a slight pause, she said haughtily, without turning her head towards him—

"I did not conceal from you that my hand had been sought times out of number before I engaged myself to you."

"I know you did not; besides I heard it

from all my friends. You know, too, that you were the ideal of my youth, while I was at college; and afterwards when I joined my regiment, I was constantly hearing of your triumphs, and I could not resist the thought rising in my mind that it would be a very grand achievement to win the heart of the celebrated beauty who had refused every man who had yet aspired to obtain her hand, and——" He checked himself, for he had no wish to add to her vanity by describing the fascination her beauty had for him before he saw her, or to wound and mortify her by reminding her of the coquetry she had employed to win his hand and heart, when she saw the position of social rank he attained by his brilliant achievements during the war.

"And did you flatter yourself that you were the only one of all my numerous admirers whom I loved?" she added, when he paused.

"*Loved?* No, Flora, not one of them —not even me," he cried passionately. "You have only loved one person in your whole life, and that one is the beautiful, graceful, talented Flora Mangold."

"Ah!" she said, with the softened ring of regret in her voice, "the usual flattery of a lover I have sadly missed in you. Even if you caressed me you never had a word of endearment for me, and now?—now in the bitterness of this hour, you paint me in colours that even I, vain and egotistical as you say I am, cannot fail to be satisfied with."

He blushed like a girl as he looked up at her. He knew that many weeks, even months, had elapsed since he had kissed the soft, curling lips of that beautiful woman before him, and yet that he had kissed them at all seemed to him now a wrong towards the other pure, sweet girl whom he had learned to love with all the passion and

earnestness of his nature. He turned his eyes away from the face before him which was smiling at his confusion, and looked out in the garden.

"Leo," said Flora, suddenly going over to him, and putting her hand on his arm, "Leo, did you come down here just now for the express purpose of being hard and reproaching me?"

"You forget that it was you who sent for me," he replied. "I should not have come of my own free will, for both girls are ill upstairs. Kathe is still unconscious and Henriette's state makes me very anxious—without your expressed wish to see me at once I should not have left them, and certainly in the midst of all this confusion and trouble I should not have dreamed of coming to the decision your words have so unexpectedly provoked."

"What decision?" she said, quickly. "Surely you have not taken in earnest my

rather childish anger of a few moments ago, when I told you to go? A woman's passing caprice is not to be treated with sober earnestness like that."

The blood mounted to his brow—by her unmerited reproach she had brought matters to an unexpected crisis. Standing still he said, with ill-concealed impatience, as if irritated at her persistence in ignoring the truth of their strange position, and his voice had a passionate ring in it which startled her—

"I have no wish to blame you in the matter—I would not presume to do so. I—I forced myself to remain true to——"

"Ah, yes! You made an observation just now in reference to the force of your will; has it—your will I mean—failed you?"

"Failed me? No, it has not; only acknowledged that it was directed into the wrong channel. Flora, I told you long

ago that in refusing to withdraw from my engagement to you I had acted on a false basis. I knew then—had known for some time—that you had not one atom of love for me. As I said before, you never cared for any one but your own richly-endowed beauty, although you made me believe at first that you—loved me. Bah!—and then I soon found out that the enthusiastic admiration I had for your lovely person had not extended to my heart—*that* you never touched. You were, and are still, my ideal of female beauty of face and form; your face is perfect; your form faultless; but your nature is cold, calculating, and selfish. I soon learned with bitterness that while you would be an ornament in my house as my wife, you would never bend yourself to be my companion—the sweet, attractive centre of my home, around which love and peace, not worldly ambition and praise, would hover. The love I hoped to win in

your heart was not there to give. Mine is a passionate, warm nature, and it was a bitter trial for me when I woke up to the consciousness that I had to look forward to a loveless marriage — a marriage in which not one sentiment of tender feeling had any influence. You looked forward to reigning in society as queen of my drawing-room. You did not care whether I loved you or not, and you accepted my reserve and coldness without question or interest as to their cause. Flora, we both made a mistake—have both done wrong. You never cared for me with any feeling of affection——"

She was silent—she could not look him in the face and tell him he erred in his surmise, for she knew that love, in the sense he referred to—true, devoted, self-sacrificing love — she had never given him, never could give to any one. Her eyes wandered carelessly over the red carpet;

she did not wish to meet those searching, grave orbs of his which she felt were reading her through, and she would at the moment have given a great deal to have been able to look boldly up in his face and contradict his statement.

"And then it was I clung obstinately and reluctantly, to the letter of my word—the more faithless I was in my heart towards you, the more——"

"Ah—well!"

"Yes, Flora, you may believe it or not, as you please; but I did fight the battle—I did wish to be true to you." A deep breath relieved him, and then he went on: "I fought against my love for Kathe as if I had been fighting with my deadliest enemy. Flora, the very first moment I perceived how dear she had become to me, I was hard and severe with myself, and with the girl also who had crept into my heart. I repulsed her simplest action. I

would not have the flowers she had thoughtlessly placed on my table in my room—she had gathered them and laid them there, not for me—oh, no! but whilst helping my aunt in some household duty. She liked coming to my house; but I avoided her presence as if she had been the plague. I was cold, even rude to her, and fled away from the sight of the face which charms me more than any other face I ever saw——"

"That is very likely, a doctor's eye is sure to be attracted by a healthy, round, red and white face like hers—Dame Nature's choice country production!" The reserve which prevented her looking in his face a while ago had vanished now; she drew up her head and, pressing her clasped hands against her bosom, continued sarcastically, "And you think it necessary to inform me of these details? You think I wish to know how this un-

sophisticated maiden threw flowers into the room of the man she wished to attract."

"Stop, Flora!" And he raised his hand with a gesture which intimidated even her, and obliged her to stay the words she was about to utter. "Overwhelm me with reproaches if you will, I will not attempt to dispute them, but say one word against Kathe, and I will defend her in a way you would not wish to see me adopt. Not once has she knowingly tried to win my love. She went back to Dresden ignorant of my feeling towards her, ignorant of her own. Why she went at all you know best. While, on the one side, she was being urged into marrying a man for whom she had not a particle of love; on the other, she was plainly made to understand that she ought to give up her room willingly for the sake of a noble visitor who had not a hundredth

part as much right in the house as she had. I was a witness to this unkind behaviour, and I had it on my tongue, when I saw her lip quiver, and her cheek flush with the insult, to tell Madame Urach in a few bitter words what I thought of her heartless conduct. But I had no right to interfere, and then, when indirectly I was asked to have her in my house, I did not dare to accept the temptation knowing what I did—how passionately I loved her. An hour later, unknown to me at the moment, she overheard me entreating my aunt to give up Kathe's friendship for a time, and to find an excuse for preventing her coming to and from the house while I remained in it. And so she went away wounded and sore in her deepest and truest feelings, and I was cruel enough, nay more, wicked enough for the sake of a false principle, for the sake of the false duty-enthroned idol I called honour then, but which now

I know was nothing of the kind, to let her depart without telling her that the lie I was acting to the world, and to you, Flora, was only a lie, and that my heart was hers entirely and for ever."

For a while he paused, overcome with the emotion his words had called forth. Flora threw herself down on the sofa, laid her head on the cushions and pressed her soft hands against her ears, as if she wished to shut out the sound of his voice; but he went on unheedingly.

"Yes, I let her go, and then I breathed more freely, and told myself that my struggle was over, and that now at least I should be at peace—fool! fool that I was! I might have known that the moment she turned her back, I should be assailed by a fiend who would torment my existence beyond endurance. It was not the exigencies of my profession which kept me away from society here and made me re-

served and morose when surrounded by the presence of the other one, so much as the deep terrible longing I had for a sight of her sweet face."

He left the window niche where he had been standing, and began slowly pacing the room, while Flora rose from her recumbent position, shook back the disordered curls from her forehead, and said with an ironical laugh—

"You longed to see Kathe? Well would dear papa understand now, if he were alive, what he could not comprehend years ago—the true instinct of his eldest girl, which caused her to rebel against calling the miller's daughter 'mamma'—which made her turn her back on the newborn baby—Kathe, you know—and passionately cry out that she had two sisters and did not want any step-sister! You need not call the foundation for your past actions a 'false principle.' Oh! no! For

the sake of this very false principle thousands of lies are enacted by people who are pleased to call themselves not only respectable but honourable—indeed you need not excuse yourself——"

"Flora, you have no right to sneer in any such way," he broke in. "I hoped that you would accept my decision without forcing me to remind you of things I would rather not refer to." His voice was hoarse with emotion, but he determined now to bring matters to an end between them. "I do not excuse myself. I know I have done you a great wrong, and yet you oblige me to remind you again, that in the evening of the day you were attacked in the forest, you told me distinctly that you hated me—and why? Because I hinted that you had talents, but not genius, and that it would be better if you gave up writing on a subject which you were not in a position to understand. No, listen—you

shall hear me," for she made an attempt to interrupt him. "The day after this candid admission on your part, I became aware that your hatred had changed into a deep attachment for your neglected lover, in consequence of his having been advanced to a post of honour at Court, and having received from the hands of his sovereign, as a mark of gratitude for a slight service rendered, an order which you informed me made me a marked man for life. And I accepted your change of feeling as silently as I had received your assertion of hatred, and let the yoke remain round my neck, because I wished to be what you sneer at—respectable and honourable. I would have acted this abominable lie to the end of time, if it had only concerned you and me—if *I* had been the only one to suffer in the loveless future before us. But there was another —we were not two, but three, and of these

three human beings one would have gone to the altar and pronounced the inevitable '*Yes*' without one pang of remorse at the misery she was entailing by that act, without one thought of anything but the position before her in the world—while the other two, separated by that fatal word as surely as if the poles divided them asunder, would yet have been one in heart and thought, and would have loved on to—"

A cry of rage interrupted him.

"Has she dared to raise her eyes to her sister's promised husband—the hypocrite! Has she told you then that her deceitful heart is yours? Traitors both of you!" she hissed rather than spoke.

He started, the colour forsook his cheek and lips, and his eyes flashed in scorn and anger; but he checked his anger and said—

"You may say what you will, but no words of yours can possibly calumniate in

my eyes such a fair modest character as Kathe's. I have not heard a word from her lips since that afternoon I drove her from my presence. I did not know she had returned yesterday. I had escaped from the noise of the rehearsals, and the confusion of the hammering and arranging here, into the quiet of my own garden, when I suddenly saw her standing on the opposite side of the rustic bridge, not daring to cross over the spot she loves so well, because I had banished her by my hard cruel words." He hesitated and paused, and the colour rushed to his forehead; he would not tell her how it was that the assurance came to him that the weeping girl at the bridge loved him—enough that he himself felt sure of it.

"As soon as I could collect my senses after the explosion in the Tower, I rushed through the park seeking for her," he went on, after he had subdued his feelings suffi-

ciently to speak calmly; "and when I found her lying on the ground, and had convinced myself that she was yet alive, I felt sure that death had passed her by in order that I might be happy with her at last. And in that moment the scales fell from my eyes, I recognized the right of my heart to speak for itself. I saw the folly of the sin I was about to commit in marrying one who did not love me, and for whom I had no feelings of affection; and there and then I determined to brave the world's opinion, and declare myself a 'respectable' hypocrite."

During the utterance of the last sentence or two, Flora's manner had completely changed. She had played for high stakes, and lost; but she was not a woman of the world for nothing. The cold calculating brain had grasped the fact that her influence was nothing by the side of the subtle power of the passionate love the young Doctor

had avowed for Kathe, but she was not daunted. She smiled back at him with a cat-like glitter in her blue eyes, while she snatched the lace cap which had fallen from her head, and placed it deftly on the top of her hair. Drawing the soft lappets under her delicate chin, she knit her brows, and with a satanic smile, which startled him with its look of malignity, she said with slow emphasis—

"Indeed, and without asking my leave, Herr Doctor? Well, do as you like! Listening to you just now I could not help asking myself the simple question—what should I have done by the side of such a very sentimental, romantic person? It is just as well that things are as they are, for both of us—I give you back your word, as one does freedom to a bird with a string attached to its foot, one end of which one holds in one's hand." She just touched with the tip of her finger her betrothal ring. "You are

free to win the sweetest and most winsome girl in the land, even my most devoted friend, if you like, and I will, myself, hand her over my ring here—but not to Kathe, I forbid that. Do you hear, Doctor Bruck? If you fly over the seas with her, or hide yourselves in the most obscure village beyond the mountains, I shall appear before you at the altar, and forbid the marriage."

"Thank God you have no power to do that," he answered, pale as death, with a deep breath.

"You think not! Well, wait and see if you will obtain your wish, if you can realize your sinful will; I think you will find *I can* prevent it; you are a faithless, miserable traitor, and not worthy of the rich perfumed plant you have cast aside for the sake of a paltry—field daisy! Bah! you will hear from me again!" and with a light wave of the hand in sign of farewell, and a mocking ringing laugh, she

swept him an elaborate courtesy, and passed into the inner apartment, shutting the door behind her.

In the anteroom leading to the corridor, the young Doctor was met by a servant, who in a low voice said—

"Fräulein Henriette is very ill, sir; her maid sent me to fetch you, and to tell you that she has had a bad fit of coughing, and has now fainted; will you come at once, sir?"

"I am coming," was the short answer, in a tone of such sad depression that the man went down into the servants' hall and reported that Fräulein Henriette must be "going to die," the Herr Doctor seemed so "cut up" on hearing that she had fainted.

CHAPTER VII.

THE oldest resident in town could not remember an occurrence which had so startled and excited the population of the town and neighbourhood as the explosion in the Tower, and the consequent death of the Counsellor and the foreman at the mill.

The two days following the catastrophe were spent in bemoaning and lamenting the rich man's unhappy fate, and in expressing sympathy and sorrow for the loss of such a very magnificent patron as the late Counsellor had been to the towns-

people; and then terrible whispers began circulating from mouth to mouth, as to the solvent state of the millionaire's affairs at the time of his death. The extensive alterations going on in the Villa had been undertaken by contract, and on partial and hasty examination it was discovered that no security of any value had been given by the Counsellor for future payment when the elaborate and expensive work was finished. The contractors looked at each other and shook their heads, and when the hours rolled on, and the suggestion of the engineer on the day the explosion took place, that the old gunpowder would not have exploded unless a large quantity of fresh material had been added to it, assumed the form of certainty, then it was that reports began to circulate implicating the honour and upright dealing of the wealthy merchant. It was a very ugly fact that a large quantity of explosive sub-

stance should have been stowed away in a vault right under the room where the late owner of such an enormous income usually kept the papers and documents and books relative to his business affairs. Why the powder should have been placed there at all was a mystery many tried to solve. They had not long to wait for the solution. On the third day confidential letters arrived from Berlin, where as yet no one had heard of his death, giving an account of the immense losses the Counsellor must have sustained in the rash speculations he had been indulging in lately, and how in consequence of the panic in the money market he had recklessly endeavoured to retrieve certain of his heavier losses by speculating largely in the opposite direction. How he had been able to conceal his losses was another question, which people in town discussed freely when the news from Berlin reached their ears.

Not even his confidential agent, the accountant at the spinning manufactory, had the least idea that he had been speculating beyond his means. Evidently, as one man observed to another, the rich man had had the happy rare good fortune of throwing dust in the eyes of those who were keenest in searching for faults in their rich neighbour's actions, or he could not have held on so long. And if what was darkly hinted was true, and he had committed the terrible crime of blowing up the silent witnesses to his disgrace and ruin, then again he had been fortunate, for, after all, it was only surmise, and he might have been in a position to recover his losses by the sale of the valuable antiquities and pictures he had collected together in his rooms in the Tower. But he had lost his own life with his fortune, and however much he might have sinned against others, there was no evidence left to prove it, since the Tower

was completely destroyed with every letter and document it contained.

While the catastrophe and its consequences were occupying the minds of people in town, sadness and sorrow reigned in the Villa. The day following the explosion many intimate friends of the family hastened to the house to hear for themselves all about the terrible misfortune which had happened, and their subdued voices and hushed footsteps had produced a sort of confusion amongst the servants that was very trying in its results to one of Flora's impatient nature. The next day a painful oppressive silence took possession of the house, visitors were denied entrance, and most of the windows were temporarily boarded across to keep out the cold, and wind, and rain; thus causing a dark gloomy half-light in the rooms, and making the outside of the dwelling look as if it had been deserted.

News of the Counsellor's loss of fortune had not yet reached the ears of Madame Urach, whose whole thoughts were concentrated on the probable value of the Villa and grounds, and who was likely to be its future possessor. With the egotism peculiar to old age she gave no heed to the death of the Counsellor, or to the sorrow which might arise from such an event among his friends. All she thought of was herself, and the selfishness inherent in her own and her granddaughter's nature never, perhaps, displayed itself so conspicuously as during the few days succeeding the blowing up of the Tower.

In a few short words Flora had informed her grandmother that her engagement to Dr. Bruck had been broken off, without referring in any way to the cause of the rupture, and the old lady had so far been roused from the train of her own thoughts as to express surprise and astonishment at

the unexpected news by shrugging her shoulders and uttering a few sentences of vexation. After all, the change in her grandchild's life was not half so serious, to her way of thinking, as the terrible state of her own uncertainty respecting her future. That she, an elderly lady, might suddenly, at any moment, be plunged into the horrors of existing on a miserable pittance, after living all these past years in princely affluence and luxury, occupied all her attention. She hastily dismissed Flora from her room, and begged her to devote her energies to the looking over and sorting of any papers of value she had in her possession relative to Moriz's affairs, and not to worry over such a thing of secondary importance as an interrupted wedding.

Down below, in the kitchen department, matters had arrived at a very serious crisis. When the morning which had been fixed for the wedding arrived, much doubt and

anxiety were expressed by several of the servants as to the likelihood of the ceremony being performed on that day. The whisper which had been first heard among the workmen while putting up the decorations had reached the kitchen, and produced a proportionate amount of disaffection among the inmates of the lower regions that soon made itself felt above stairs. The man who brought the ices from town about ten o'clock was full of the news in circulation, that the Counsellor's affairs were in an utterly ruined condition. Very soon what he said was confirmed by an exaggerated report which reached the Villa an hour or two later, to the effect that not only had the late master lost everything, but that he was frightfully in debt into the bargain. A panic seized the servants, and while some began packing up their boxes ready for departure as soon as they could extort their wages from the bewildered butler,

others quietly walked into the dining-room and helped themselves to the delicacies and viands prepared for the invited guests. The confusion and discontent below was considerably increased when Flora's maid announced to the butler that her mistress's wedding was put off, and that she had orders to let him know that the lawyers and town commissioners would arrive about mid-day, in order to arrange certain matters relative to the valuables in the house, and that he was to have the library prepared for their reception.

The first symptoms of disaffection down-stairs were exhibited by the careless indifference with which Madame Urach's bell was attended to. She rang, and instead of her summons being answered at once she had to ring a second time : even then no one appeared in reply, and the angry old lady was compelled to leave her room and appear at the head of the stairs to find out

the reason for such an unparalleled piece of neglect on the part of her usual attendants. Leaning over the balustrade she saw a bevy of maids standing below talking and gesticulating in such eager earnestness that she imagined they had not heard her summons, till a few words of coarse reflection on the family in general gave the haughty old lady a glimpse into the insubordinate state of affairs, and caused her to retreat back to her own room with a flush of scorn and anger on her face.

But none of this confusion had reached the wing of the house where Henriette's private apartments were situated. The invalid girl was a favourite in the servants' hall, and now that they knew she was ill and suffering, not one of the whole staff would have ventured to speak above a whisper, or walk, except on tip-toe, on the staircase and landing leading to her door, for fear of disturbing her or of adding to her

pain. Dr. Bruck had remarked to Nanni that her young mistress was dangerously ill, and Nanni in her turn had weepingly announced it to the servants below.

Henriette was lying on the sofa in her sitting-room, her golden head supported by pillows, and her beautiful blue eyes closed for the moment in exhaustion. She knew she must die, but she did not regret it; life for her had always been a burden.

The excitement of yesterday had been more than her frail body could bear, and towards morning she had had a violent fit of coughing, and then sank into a deep swoon from which Dr. Bruck had great difficulty to rouse her. Her face was white as snow, and her small emaciated hand was as white as her cheek.

As the young Doctor gazed at her, he knew that she would be spared the pain of leaving her much-loved home to live with Kathe at the Mill-house, according to

Flora's suggestion—would be spared the still greater shame of hearing that her brother-in-law's name was branded with the mark of infamy—spared also the knowledge that he had sought his own death to hide the consequences of his sins. She had around her all she could wish or desire ; her last breath would be breathed in the presence of the Doctor, for whom she ever expressed the greatest affection. He had promised her he would not leave her, would not go away and settle in Leipzig till at least she "was better," as she had remarked with an expressive smile, which told the young Doctor she knew that she must die soon.

Presently she rallied, took a little beef-tea, and then, with a sweet gentle smile, laid her hand in Kathe's, and said—

"I am as happy now as I used to be in the spring, when I was staying with Auntie Diakonus. You are here to nurse me, and

you too"—she turned her eyes to Dr. Bruck—"Leo, you and Kathe I love best in all the world; remember *that* when I am gone."

Kathe had recovered rapidly from the effect of the blow on her head, and within an hour of her return to consciousness had been able to leave her bed and go about as usual. But for her looking a little pale, with the plaster on the side of her head and her hair hanging in two thick plaits down her back, no one would have guessed that she had had such a remarkably narrow escape of her life as to be first knocked down by a flying splinter of wood and then immersed in water from the overflowing river, where she would have been drowned as she lay if the keen eyes of love had not seen her fall.

She appeared as strong and able to walk about as usual, and evinced no signs of languor in her outward manner, though her

heart was sinking within her at the sorrow before her. She knew quite well that Henriette was dying, and it was hard to part with her, although she tried to make herself believe that it was best as it was for one whose life could never be anything to its owner but one prolonged agony.

By the side of this grief was the bitter knowledge that her guardian's conduct had been cruel and reprehensible, even if no worse, towards those who had placed their faith in his integrity and upright dealing. She had heard the whisper in the hall as she passed through ; and when she asked Dr. Bruck, with her eyes full of earnest anxiety raised to his face, if these things were true, he had not replied "No," but had turned away sorrowfully, and muttered in a low voice, "I dare tell you nothing now." And afterwards he had relapsed into his usual reserved, silent manner,

from which Kathe made no attempt to rouse him.

A few hours succeeding to Dr. Bruck's interview with Flora in her private apartment, he led his aunt into the anteroom outside Henriette's chamber, and closed the communicating door. When the old lady returned to the invalid's side, her eyes were red with weeping, but her mouth and face generally shone with a bright subdued happiness, and she softly informed the two girls that she intended going to stay at her nephew's apartment in town while the house by the river was being repaired. She did not reveal the subject of her private conversation in the anteroom, but as she stooped over Henriette and tenderly kissed her cheek, she whispered—

"When your sister Flora comes to see you presently, tell her that I ran away without saying good-bye to her because I think she would rather I did not disturb her."

And pressing Kathe affectionately in her arms, she quietly left the room, descended the side staircase, and left the Villa.

An hour later Dr. Bruck received a message from town commanding his presence at the palace. The Prince desired to consult him on some important matter connected with his son's state of health; and as Henriette was in a quiet doze, and her condition was not immediately alarming, he sprang on the horse the messenger had brought with him, and rode off to town.

A few moments after his departure, Flora slowly ascended the stairs, to pay a visit to her young sister. Without turning her eyes even towards the bed on which she imagined Kathe was still lying, she passed on to Henriette's sofa. She stayed a short while by the sick girl, asked her one or two questions which Henriette was too weak to answer, and then rose and left

the room, preferring to pass through the maid's bed-chamber rather than risk an encounter with Kathe, who, from an arm-chair in the corner behind the curtains, had watched these strange manœuvres and wondered what they meant.

To her, Flora's strange behaviour was an enigma, especially when, as Flora moved away from the sofa, and she spoke softly to her not to disturb Henriette, she stared blankly in front of her, and pretended not to hear even the sound of Kathe's voice.

Once also in the course of the morning Madame Urach found her way into Henriette's room, dressed in a black rustling silk, with a crape veil fastened on her head. She looked so wobegone and miserable, with the tears pouring down her face, that Kathe feared the excitement would do Henriette harm, especially when the old lady began wringing her hands and lamenting the "fearful position" of the

household in consequence of Moriz's death.

About ten o'clock on the morning of the third day after the explosion, Madame Urach suddenly entered Flora's study with a newspaper in her hand and her face as pale as ashes. Her grandchild was in the act of writing labels for several trunks packed and corded in one corner of the room ; but when she saw the excited state of her grandmother, she rose and went over to her, and leading her to an easy-chair, on which the old lady sank rather than sat down, said anxiously—

"What is the matter ?"

"My four thousand thalers are gone!" she moaned in answer. "Child! child! I have been deceived by a scoundrel, a villain, and my—my all—the savings that your grandfather managed to leave me—are all gone! My four thousand thalers, that I saved and guarded as carefully——"

"No, grandmamma, keep to the truth! say rather your four thousand thalers that you thoughtlessly and hopefully speculated with!" cried Flora, in a hard, unsympathizing tone. "Did I not warn you? Did I not tell you to be careful? And I was laughed at, and called all sorts of ugly names, because I would not withdraw my fortune from the funds—that were secure, at any rate—to double its value in your investment. Now, who was right, you or I? Has the firm which you joined become bankrupt?"

"Worse! It's a disgraceful affair! Just read for yourself. The man must have been a fiend. There is no hope of recovering a penny. I don't think I possess five pounds in the world!" the old lady moaned aloud, handing the paper to Flora, who scanned the passage rapidly, and then laid the page down on the table.

"What I cannot understand is, that they

refer there to a report circulated some days ago," the old lady continued; "and if that is true, the fact must have been known for some days—four or five, at least. Moriz knew nothing about it. It is very strange, and——"

"Don't you think it likely the account might have been in the papers you missed?"

"Ah! What? You fancy poor dear Moriz knew of this, and hid the papers on purpose, so that I might not hear of this terrible news till after the wedding? He thought it would upset me! And he knew of my loss, and—and it was he himself who talked me into it. Ah, yes! that is a good thought. I can swear that Moriz persuaded me to go into that undertaking; and my dear, don't you agree with me that, as he misled me in the affair, I can claim compensation out of the estate?"

Flora clasped her hands in despair, won-

dering how she was to combat her grandmother's illusion without distressing her by telling her the truth concerning the real state of affairs. She had shrunk hitherto from the difficult task in the vague hope that some one else would have incidentally made known to her the disgraceful position in which Moriz's death had placed them. But now there seemed no alternative but for her to inform the old lady herself of the hopeless condition of the Counsellor's affairs, and thus hinder her grandmother from complicating matters by making false claims on a fortune which did not exist.

"Grandmamma," she said in a low voice, laying her hand on the old lady's arm, "grandmamma, the first question to consider is the value of the estate."

"How absurd you are, child! Just look out of window and you will soon know, if you have your senses all right, that such a poor little sum as my four thousand thalers

would never be missed from the proceeds of the estate if it were sold. Supposing, too, that Moriz's capital is irretrievably lost, as they say all the books and papers relative to it are destroyed, the land and house, to say nothing of the works of art contained in every room, will realize an immense sum, quite sufficient for us to live in luxury—" she sighed a deep breath of relief at the thought. " Why, my dear, the furniture of your room alone would fetch a price that would repay me for my loss—almost. How thankful I should be, Flora, if I were certain about my right to inherit this house, and—without going through the nuisance of a lawsuit."

" But supposing there is no necessity for you to enter upon a lawsuit."

Madame Urach started.

" Are you mad, Flora ? Weak and old as I am I would run for hours, go without food and sleep for weeks rather than willingly

admit any other claim to this house than my own—nonsense, child! things have not taken such a terrible turn as that yet. You are cruel and wrong to suggest it even. Do you think that I—I will give up all this luxury and comfort and the courtly circle of friends I have gathered about me to a poor, obscure person, whose whole life has been spent in poverty, and whose manners and surroundings would be as out of place here as a beggar's? No, my dear, I will not—I will fight for my right till I——"

"There is no need to get so excited over the matter, grandmamma. The old aunt living by the Rhine will have as small a claim to the property as you——"

"Who will? Are there other heirs?"

"Yes—the creditors!"

Madame Urach uttered a low cry of rage, and started from her chair.

"Be quiet, I beseech you, grandmamma;

don't make a scene, please!" murmured Flora. "The people downstairs know this better than I do, and are leaving the house as quickly as rats do a sinking ship. I dare not conceal from you any longer the terrible state of affairs, and now it only remains for us, as the speculator's dupes, to act in such a manner as not to make ourselves ridiculous. You must not look like that, grandmamma," and she arranged the old lady's untidy locks, and pinned the crêpe veil tastefully across her head, and fastened the lace round her throat more trimly with a cameo brooch she took from her own dressing-table; "keep up your own self-respect to the last. We must go away from here as soon and as quietly as we can —the whole affair is utterly disgraceful. No one doubts that the explosion was a wilful act—in plain terms the act of a villain, as Moriz will henceforth be called."

"The scoundrel!—the infamous knave!" screamed the old lady, springing up from her chair and tearing about as if she were going mad.

Pale as death, Flora quietly moved over to the open window and shut it close.

"Take care, grandmamma," she said warningly, "you will be heard if you make such a noise as that. I have noticed people are hanging about outside; they have been there all the morning—were there at six o'clock. I am sure they are hanging about to see that none of our 'valuables' are removed—the cowards!" and her lips curled in scorn. "They are looking after their own interests. I was told by my maid, while drinking my coffee about an hour ago, that the tradesmen in town are furious—not a bill has been paid for six months, and you know, grandmamma, at what an expensive rate even we have been living. The butcher has

gained an entrance to the hall, and declared that he means to see you as soon as you are dressed. He holds you responsible for a heavy bill as mistress of the house, and has already been very insolent about us all to the servants."

"Good God! what a position that wretch, whom I trusted implicitly, has placed us in by his cowardly act!" cried the old lady, bursting into tears of rage and bitterness. "What are we to do? The position is truly tragic! What shall we do?" and she wrung her hands, the very picture of despair.

"The first thing to do is to pack up our own private property and every article that legally belongs to us, if we do not wish to have a seal placed on it by those remorseless vagabonds the bailiffs, who will be here some time to-day. When once they gain possession we may know that our last chance is gone. I was just about to fetch

my——" she checked herself with a grim smile—" my trousseau, and pack it in those boxes. Then I thought of taking an inventory of everything in the house, and if you won't hand over the property to the men yourself——"

" Indeed I won't—neither now nor——"

" Then the housekeeper will have to do it. We have every reason to say with truth that we are ill."

Taking from a drawer of her writing-table the key of the room where her trousseau was laid out, she moved away to the door, followed by her grandmother, who was bitterly muttering to herself angry invectives against the author of all her misery and distress. Flora led her to her own room, set her down in an easy-chair, and then went off as quickly as she could on her own errand of packing up her wedding finery.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE wind blew gently across the tops of the trees near the house, scattering the golden drops of the fountain in a showery spray over the side of the marble basin, and then wafted the sweet scent of the mignonette through the open window as far as the sofa-bed where Henriette was lying. The red-leaved creeper hanging round the window swayed to and fro in the air as if it, too, would like to follow the perfume of the flowers, and find its way as far as the white muslin curtains surrounding the sick girl's couch.

Kathe sat by the bed watching her sister while she slept, and gazing tenderly at the wan appearance of her white face and the thin attenuated look of the hand resting on the coverlid, not daring to rise from her seat and send away the birds clamouring for their usual morning meal at the window-sill, for fear of disturbing the light sleeper. Every breath was so short and weak, it was painful to see it come and go; and Kathe knew from the sad experience she had gained in nursing her sister the last few days, that sleep to her was life. The twittering of the hungry little creatures outside made the young girl nervous, for the stillness in the room had begun to feel oppressive, and no sound in the house could be heard through the carpeted floors of the corridor.

Nanni sat in the inner room working as usual on some light material that made no rustling noise each time she moved. Every

now and again she looked up from her work, and gazed curiously for a moment at the "young lady from the Mill" sitting in the arm-chair, who had lost half a million of money in the explosion, and yet "looked just as sweet and simple as ever," dressed in a soft white morning wrapper, with her fresh young face graver than usual, earnestly watching her sleeping charge.

"So young and full of life, and yet she does not care for gaiety a bit," thought the waiting-woman to herself as her needle flew in and out in that noiseless way which made her presence in a sick-room an invaluable boon. "She is not a bit like Fräulein Flora, who thinks of no one but herself. One would think she didn't know the value of money, she takes her loss so quietly, whereas her eldest sister is packing away as hard as she can to secure her own things safe. She has run that poor maid of hers off her legs finding her things this morning

—not a handkerchief will she leave behind. She says she is going to Leipzig first to arrange matters for the wedding there, and that her good lover—God bless him for a nice gentleman, far too good for her!—is going to follow as soon as the poor little one is better. What a proud thing she is to be sure—she seems to think no one good enough to wait on her, and she lets that dear sweet——"

Her thoughts were interrupted by a loud knocking in one of the adjoining rooms which caused the invalid to half open her eyes, and Kathe to rise quickly from her chair and beckon to Nanni to take her place and hold the little thin hand on the coverlid.

Quietly and quickly Kathe opened the door of Henriette's room, closed it behind her, and then without any ceremony opened the door of the adjoining apartment, and entered.

Flora was kneeling down on the ground, in the act of folding her wedding veil, when Kathe appeared before her. The long satin and lace dress which was to have adorned her beautiful person two days previously, was hanging from its stand, and partly covering her shoulder as she stooped over the trunk, and the maid was unfastening the orange-blossoms and laying them in a card-box at the side, in order to pack the dress without injury to its freshness.

"I am very sorry—I had no idea the knocking could be heard in Henriette's room, or I would not have done it," said Flora, in answer to Kathe's remark that the noise was disturbing their sister's sleep. "I am sure it did not once enter my head she could hear me. I have been nailing the labels on to those trunks." Her voice trembled slightly, though she spoke quickly. "You move about yourself so noiselessly

that one might imagine it was the ghost of an ancestor doomed to roam over the scenes of her former existence," a wicked smile parted her lips as she added: "and mischief seems to follow your footsteps—wherever you go a mark of three crosses ought to be made, and——" She dismissed her maid with a haughty wave of her hand, then, as Kathe was silently following the woman's example, she flung the veil with a jerk into the trunk, and cried out—

"Stay here! If you have one particle of honour left in your woman's nature you will hear what I have to say."

Kathe gently put the hand aside which held her dress, and turned round.

"I will listen to anything you have to say," she replied, fixing her earnest eyes on the excited and passionate face of her interlocutor, "only don't speak so loud, please, or Henriette will hear you."

Flora did not answer, she seized Kathe's hand and drew her over to the window.

"Come here!" she said. "Let me look at you—I want to see how you look after being kissed."

The young girl started back and instinctively turned her head from the scrutinizing gaze of the impertinent face bent towards her, and a rush of colour dyed her face crimson with shame at being so addressed.

"You have no right, elder sister as you are, to speak to me in any such tone."

"Ah, very well, little innocent; but I in my turn say to you, that, younger sister as you are, how dare you raise your eyes to the man to whom your elder sister is engaged?"

Kathe started again as if she had been struck by an unseen hand. Who could possibly have dived down into the very deepest recesses of her heart, and brought

to light the secret she had striven with all the power of her young passionate nature to hide even from her own sight? Painfully conscious that her face was becoming white as death, that she had no right to the secret thus unexpectedly divulged by the one who had just cause to condemn its very existence, she made no attempt to speak, and her pale lips did not move.

"Bad conscience! your looks condemn you, little one. In there, you know that my accusation is true!" she lightly touched the girl's bosom with her finger, and laughed a low mocking laugh. "You see, my dear, an elder sister cannot be duped; she is able to read to the innermost record the hidden thoughts of an 'innocent' girl's heart like yours, and knows every sign of the would-be artlessness which tried to captivate the heart of the man you have dared to fall in love with, from the

graceful tribute of leaving flowers in his room, to——"

A tinge of colour came back to the marble face, a power of movement to the rigid figure. Was it possible that such a simple act of forgetfulness, an act that she had often regretted since, not on account of the construction that might be put on it, but on account of the bitterness she felt when the young Doctor silently removed them out of his room—could it be that such a simple act was to be a cause of reproach to her now? Anger and just indignation brought life to her cold trembling limbs and gave her courage to speak.

"I acknowledge it was a piece of thoughtless forgetfulness on my part," she said, drawing herself up with a gesture as haughty as an insulted queen. "Whoever thought it necessary to tell you of the circumstances has—"

"It was he—himself!"

"Then I am morally certain you have falsified what he said."

"Take care! take care what you are saying; my patience is very nearly exhausted," cried Flora with a sneer, and tapping her foot on the floor in angry impatience. "You think I speak falsely? Does he when he boasts of his conquest over you?"

The colour which dyed Kathe's cheeks a moment ago, vanished as quickly as it came; she shook her head, and after a short pause said firmly—

"I won't believe it, not if you assert it a thousand times over. I would rather doubt everything we are taught to honour and reverence in our intercourse with the world, than that *he* is capable of such an untruth. No, no," she went on passionately. "He would not make such an unmanly boast, even he himself in the

privacy of his own room. He is honourable, noble, grand—" she checked herself suddenly, and lowering her voice, added, "You were always suspicious of him, hatefully, wickedly so; I heard that with my own ears when I first came in the spring. I dared not enter your presence when he was with you, but now that I know him better, know how upright and true he is, it does not hurt me so much that you malign him, you and you only. How you can find it in your heart to do it is a mystery to me; your notions of honour must be very vague, Flora, or you could not and would not speak evil of a man to whom you are to be married so shortly."

Flora started, and looked up at her indignant young sister with doubt and curiosity strangely mingled in the expression on her face—she seemed scarcely to be able to believe her ears.

"Either you are the most finished

actress, or—a declaration of love must be printed in black letters on a white ground for you to understand it. Do you really know—nothing?" With an impertinent smile which showed all her teeth and made her face look almost diabolical, she took hold of Kathe's two arms, gazed searchingly into her eyes, and then pushed her angrily away, saying—

"Bah! what more can I want? Have you not excited yourself and defended him till you have scarcely a breath left?"

Kathe turned aside and walked towards the door.

"I don't see what you detained me for just now."

"Don't you? am I so obscure then in my expressions? must I speak more plainly? Well, then, my dear, I do not want to know anything more, nor anything less, than how Leo Bruck has behaved to you since yesterday morning? what he has said to you?"

"How he has behaved to me? what he has said? That you can hear in a very few words. He tried hard to make me understand that my blind hope in Henriette's recovery was false—he tried very kindly to prepare me," her voice broke and the tears rolled down her cheeks, "for Henriette's death; she cannot get better."

Flora drew back silently—remorse for a moment overcoming her; perhaps also the presentiment that she was playing a losing game with these two young people.

"Did you not know that long ago?" she said presently in a low tone; "have you not often said that for her to go away for ever would be a happy release from so much suffering?" Then walking gently up to Kathe again she added—

"And was that the entire subject of your conversation with him—word for word, all he said?"

A miserable suspicious feeling took pos-

session of Kathe's mind that Flora sought an answer to this question, not so much from simple jealousy as from pure vanity; and she replied rather stiffly, "Do you think that Doctor Bruck could possibly take an interest in anything else while watching by the bedside of a dying girl, especially when that girl is the truest and most faithful friend he has?"

"I know she loves him," replied Flora.

An indignant flush rose to Kathe's face, and Flora, noticing it, went on with heartless want of tact.

"Yes, the man may congratulate himself that he can attract and win girls' hearts as easily as a flame allures moths to singe their wings at its light. How the world will chuckle when the fact is made known that each of Banker Mangold's daughters has been foolish enough to worship at the same shrine! Stay here! you shall not go yet!"

She had hitherto spoken in a half-bantering, half-sarcastic tone, but when the young girl moved towards the door, she uttered the command for her to remain in a loud threatening voice that rooted Kathe to the spot with astonishment and terror, for fear the wild cry had been heard in the sick-room.

"Yes, I mean what I say, even our youngest sister, the owner of the Mill and Mill-house, stout of limb and courageous of heart, has been weak enough to lay her weapons of defence at this man's feet, and beg for a smile of approval; oh, yes! you may look as indignant and haughty as you please, but you know it is true—true that you surrendered heart and soul without his—"

"Flora, how dare you speak so! you know that what you are saying is false—"

"False? very well, I will believe you, and you can clear yourself of my accusation

if you choose, by withdrawing what you said just now, with such charming *empressement*, about his honour and faith."

"I will not withdraw one single expression."

"Ah, you won't? you are a wicked girl to fall in love with him. Look at me, Kathe! you dare not, you cannot look me in the face and say you did *not?*"

Kathe raised her head, and gazed at her sister in speechless entreaty. She put her hand to the wound on her head, which was throbbing from the excitement of the conversation, but she took no heed to it; all her thoughts were concentrated on the subject of her sister's unkind remarks. Her heart beat fast, and her breath came and went quickly, as she said, as firmly as she could—

"You have no right, Flora, to ask me such a question, and I am not bound to answer you; but you have called me wicked,

and spoken of treachery; they are words I have applied to myself, and——"

"A confession, in plain terms."

A faint smile flitted across the girl's pale lips and shone in her eyes, but her cheeks were as white as the linen band on her head, as she said sadly—

"Yes, I do confess what I have no need to be ashamed of; but I will not confess to being guilty of the mean act you accuse me of, that of wishing to win to myself the affection of your lover. We cannot help our feelings, no one can; we are answerable, however, for the use we make of them—the way we indulge them. Is it wicked to worship and reverence the peace of a household? Is it wrong to admire the beauty of a grand tree growing in another man's garden? And I ask you, is it wrong to love without one shade of envy? I will have nothing to do with either of you. I will never cross yours or

your lover's path again; you shall neither of you ever hear of me again; you shall not even be able to say that I ever reminded you of my existence. How could it hurt your wedded happiness if I love him to the end of my life?——"

A bitter laugh interrupted her.

"Bravo, little one! we shall have you breaking forth into verse next."

"No, Flora, I leave that to you; all I say is, that I feel I have left far behind me the even and quiet paths of girlhood, and that since I have had this load to carry in my heart, my feelings and impressions are deeper, and perhaps more earnest."

She stepped back from the door where she had been standing, and went towards the inner part of the room. As she passed the rack where Flora's wedding dress still hung, she inadvertently touched it with her foot, and brought it to the ground with a rustling noise. Shocked and vexed with

herself for her awkwardness, she stooped to pick it up and repair the mischief she had done by placing it back in its upright position; but Flora kicked it aside with her foot, and said snappishly—

"Let the rubbish be! even that lifeless thing resents your wickedness, and falls over directly you touch it."

"Do you think you are free from fault yourself, Flora?" asked Kathe, the angry blood mantling in her face, for her nature was passionate, and she felt she had been bitterly wounded and unjustly accused. That last taunt roused her anger, and she forgot prudence and discretion, and Henriette and everything, and cried out—"What was it made me first begin to care for the man you say it is wicked to love? It was pity, warm deep pity for one whom you did not understand, whom you slandered and wounded at every turn in private life, and snubbed and pained when

others were near. If it was such a fearful crime for another to love him, why did you seek to free yourself from your engagement, why did you tell him that you would not marry him, that you hated him? I heard it, if you care to remember. I was by your side when you flung your ring into the water and cried out, 'Free, free!'"

"For Heaven's sake, Kathe, don't excite yourself in such a way!" Flora cried, pressing her hands over her ears.

A moment later she held the finger on which she wore her betrothal ring close to Kathe's eyes, and said as her lips parted in a sardonic smile:

"There, there it is! I can swear that you will find no flaw in it, every letter is perfect in the engraving. However, to bring the matter to an end, I will tell you that this golden hoop has finished the part it has to play in my life. My engagement to Dr. Bruck is broken."

Kathe started.

"But once before you said your engagement was broken, and he would not consent to it," she stammered out breathlessly.

"Yes, I know; but then the miserable traitor had a grain of honour left in him; now he has none."

"Flora, has—has he consented?"

"Yes, he has, and if you wish to hear——"

"Then he never loved you! and it was not love for you which made him refuse his consent in the spring, he must have had another motive. Thank God! Thank God, he can still be a happy man!"

"Do you think so? You forget I am here, my dear," said Flora, seizing the arm of her young sister while she glanced expressively in her face from under her knitted eyebrows. I will never forgive him for making me beg for my liberty and refusing it; now he shall learn what it is to have the coveted cup

lifted to his lips and then dashed to the ground just as he expects to drink the sweet draught. I will not give up my ring, no, not if I have to hold it fast with my teeth."

"The false one, the one you wear in place of the true one you threw into the water?"

"Can you prove that, my wise one? If so, where are your witnesses? It will be simply absurd to accuse me of such an act of insanity. However, make yourself happy. I am not so diabolically cruel as to hinder my late lover from the joys of married life; oh no, he can marry to-morrow if he will, only it must be with some one he does *not* love. He may marry for money, position, what he will; against that I have nothing to urge. I will have him watched night and day, and the moment I see him turning in the direction I do not choose, woe be to him, and woe be to *her*

if he selects the one I do not intend he shall marry !"

Snatching up one of the orange blossoms lying on the table she twisted it in and out her fingers till it was a mass of torn and crumpled leaves, then she went on slowly :

" Well, Kathe, you love him ; have you no desire to beg for mercy for him ? Think a moment, I have his happiness in my power. I can give it or withdraw it as I please. This power is a priceless boon to me, and yet I am greatly tempted to freely give it up, in order to prove the strength and depth of so-called genuine love. And I will too, I will hand this ring over to you, and with it transmit to you the right of giving it to whomsoever you please ; but understand me thoroughly, in accepting this power you act in my stead, exactly as if it were I instead of you, and remember that I from this moment should

lay no claim to it myself. Will you, can you, accept the conditions in order to give to Dr. Bruck the freedom he wishes for ?"

Involuntarily Kathe clasped her hands together on her bosom, and the muscles round her mouth worked painfully with the struggle going on within.

" I will accept the hardest conditions if thereby I can free Dr. Bruck from your clutches." The voice was clear, but very low.

" Don't make rash promises ; you may be sacrificing your own happiness and peace of mind."

The young girl was silent, she raised her hand to the bandage on her head, and over her expressive face, courage, strength, and faith in herself passed in rapid succession.

" I know what I am doing, there is no need to reflect about it," she said simply.

Flora held a second spray of orange blossom in her hand; she put it against her nose as if inhaling its perfume, while she gave her sister a searching side-glance.

"But supposing, in order to humiliate me, he were to wish for you?"

Kathe caught her breath, but she replied steadily—

"He will not do that, you told me yourself he did not like me."

"Right. But we will just for a moment suppose that he came to you and told you that he loved you; in such a case the pledge for his freedom would be in very bad hands, don't you think so? For you know that, once the ring in your hands, you represent *me*, and you would have to say him nay; no, the temptation would be too much for you. I shall keep my ring myself."

"Good Heavens, is it possible for one

sister to enjoy tormenting another to this cruel extent!" Kathe cried out in the bitterness of her heart. "And yet, just because you are so selfish, because you have no mercy in your heart, and because you love to play fast and loose with this poor fellow, I will do all in my power to free him from you. You shall not *dare* exercise your power over him. He shall begin a fresh life, shall enjoy home affections, and shall not be forced to walk by the side of one who cares for nought else in the world but society and herself."

"You are very flattering! You are far too much interested in him, show yourself too warm a partizan of his, for me to confide my golden bauble to your care."

"Give it to me, I accept your conditions; you may trust me."

"And if he really and truly loves you?"

The girl's lips quivered painfully and she clasped her hands together, but she did not waver in her resolution.

"Even if it were so, I will keep my promise: he would easily find a girl to love far preferable to me; besides he is not likely to make a mistake twice. Give me the ring; it is false I know, and has not the least right to be a link between you—still I promise to do as you say, as surely as that other is under the water, for the sole reason of redeeming Leo Bruck's right to his freedom."

She stretched out her hand for the ring.

"As far as I have been able to judge your character I give you credit for being far too honourable to make use of the tiny hoop for your own advantage," said Flora impressively, putting the ring into her hand.

Kathe shivered as the gold touched her,

and closing her fingers on the hardly-won gift, a bitter smile hovered round her lips, as she thought that Flora had judged her rightly in saying that she was too honourable to make use of the prize for her own advantage. "And too proud also," she might have added.

"Well?" said Flora, noticing the smile, and not able to understand its meaning.

"You have my word," she said, raising her closed hand and shaking it in the air. "You ought to be content," she added sadly, and opened the door to depart.

At that moment Dr. Bruck crossed the hall on his return from town. He glanced at the open doorway and saw the sisters, the elder with a look of conscious triumph shining on her face as she caught sight of him and coldly bent her head in greeting, while the younger one with a hasty step and blushing face turned rapidly in the opposite direction, but not before he had

had time to note the sad expression on her mouth and the frightened look in her eyes, as hers met his. He hurried after her, and a moment later the door closed and Flora's mocking hollow laugh was deadened behind the curtains.

CHAPTER IX.

THAT same afternoon the bailiffs arrived from town to take possession of the house. They had been expected from early morning, preparations had even been made for their reception; but when at last they did arrive the whole household felt as if they received a shock. Late as it was, they yet came too soon.

Madame Urach's old-fashioned furniture, which had been stowed away in a lumber-room when years ago she went to stay with the Counsellor, was being dusted in the upper hall preparatory to being packed;

Flora's mumerous trunks were still standing in the courtyard waiting for the carts; and various empty packages of large size, which the servants had not had time to fill with the few dozens of rare and costly wine specially regarded as Madame Urach's property, were scattered about the hall in every direction.

When the sheriff sent a message to Madame Urach begging for an interview she sternly declined to see him, on the plea that her nerves were already upset with grief and excitement, and that it was quite beyond her power to accede to his wish. And when later on the old lady was informed that in consequence of the furniture of her private apartment not being her own personal property, she must allow the bailiffs to take an inventory of the contents of the rooms, and put their seal to the doors, she proudly retired to an empty little chamber on the same floor,

and ordered her own old-fashioned sofa to be carried there for her use, rather than encounter a personal interview with the unwilling authors of her misery. The sheriff, who was a good-natured, pleasant man, felt great compassion for the proud, selfish old lady, and ordered his subordinates to place a few small luxuries from her elegant apartment at her disposal, before closing the doors and applying the seal.

In the meantime Flora was hastily gathering together as many valuable objects from the drawing-room table as she could carry away. In vain the servants respectfully urged her to desist, and leave things as they were. She would not listen to their remonstrance, and sternly bade them do her bidding.

They were hers and her grandmother's, given to them at various times by the Counsellor and other friends, and she would not leave them to be "confiscated" by

those terrible Jews. But when the bailiffs arrived and the sheriff politely informed her that she must touch nothing in the rooms—that not an article must be disturbed or carried out of the house until she had proved her claim to it as her own personal property—that he was sorry to undeceive her, but things must remain as they were, and he must attach his seal to each separate room, and that afterwards whatever article she might apply for and prove as her own would be restored to her. For the present, however, nothing must be removed from its place. On this she became very angry, and insisted that she had a right to her own things when those "things" were her personal effects; but he was firm, and she had no alternative but to submit, which she did at last with a very bad grace.

The only part of the house left undisturbed by the bailiffs was the left wing in habited by Kathe and Henriette.

Dr. Bruck sent for the sheriff, and in a few words informed him of Henriette's condition, and how impossible it would be for him to fulfil his duty and take an inventory of a room wherein a girl lay dying; "besides," he added, "I know for certain that the furniture about her is her own; it was a gift from her late brother-in-law, the Counsellor, on her birthday two years ago, and is as much her own property as the night-dress she has on at present."

The sheriff bowed acquiescence, and gave orders to his subordinates for those rooms to be left in peace; after which the young Doctor returned to the bedside of the dying girl. He had not been absent a quarter of an hour, but when he re-entered the room he saw that a change had come over her even in that short space of time. She was lying with her face turned to the open window, through which the setting sun was hiding behind glorious clouds of crimson

and golden hues; swallows were flying around the window-sill, hastening home to their nests under the overhanging roof; and the song of the blackbird could be heard in the distance, mingling with the cooing of the doves in their cot.

The young Doctor resumed his seat by the bed, and gently laid his fingers on the dying girl's hand. He felt the fluttering pulse, and signed to Kathe to wipe her brow.

"Flora!" she whispered, raising her eyes to his face with a beseeching gaze.

"Would you like to see her?" he asked, rising to go and fetch her.

Henriette faintly shook her head.

"No—don't be vexed if I would rather be with you and Kathe alone until——" she did not finish her sentence, but began picking at the vine-leaves she had entreated to have laid on the sheet near her head. "I will spare her that—she will thank me

—and you know she hates emotional scenes;" a faint smile flickered for a second round her lips. "You will give my love to her, Leo."

The young man silently bowed his head, while Kathe's heart beat fast with a dread that she could scarcely define to herself. Henriette assumed still that the old relationship existed between the Doctor and Flora—ought she to be told the truth? She glanced uneasily at the young man's face, and noticed how grave and sad it looked; but he made no attempt to answer, and evidently did not intend disturbing his patient's mind with news that there was no express need for her to hear.

Again she opened her eyes, and her gaze wandered to the window.

"How lovely the sky is. For the free soul to be there must be very heavenly," she whispered. "I wonder if it will be possible to look down on earth when one is

there. I should like to be sure that you are happy, Leo," she murmured, turning her head with difficulty to look at him, and her large eyes were soft and tender in their expression—" quite happy when I am gone. You are so good—you deserve really to be happy."

The stern, grave expression of the Doctor's face vanished, and a smile beamed in his eyes as, stooping over the exhausted girl, he said softly :

" My future is going to be very happy, Henriette. I think I may hope that I shall not always be alone ; or rather, I know I shall not if God spares me, and—does my saying so give you pleasure, my dear little sister ?"

He took the small thin hand in his, and bending his head low to her face, kissed her on the cheek. A faint colour rose to her cheek as she looked across at Kathe with a contented smile shining

brightly in her eyes; then, as if something in Kathe's attitude of dejection pained her, the smile died away from her lips, and she said between gasps for breath:

"Dear Leo, look at Kathe, and let me tell you now that your coldness to her has so often hurt me—hurts me here," and she pointed to her heart. "You have been unkind to her sometimes, Leo; I have never been able to understand why. She has no one to love her. Be kind to her, Leo—stand by her."

"I will, dear, till death!" he said low down in her ear with more earnestness of tone than he intended.

"Good—that is right, Leo—now I am happy. Take care of her, and she will stand between you and trouble, as she has done for me."

"I will, like the true *sister* I will be to him from this day forth," broke in Kathe in a low, choked voice.

A sweet smile hovered round Henriette's mouth, and she closed her eyes too soon to see Kathe turn away her head, and with a gesture of her hand wave aside the Doctor's outstretched fingers, as if the promise she had just given did not require ratifying with a clasp of the hand.

The smile broadened, and the dying girl laughed aloud; but the effort produced a rattle in her throat.

"Love to grandmamma," she muttered. "I want to sleep—to be at rest. Leo, let me sleep—sleep——"

"In a few minutes you shall sleep, dear," he answered soothingly.

He put her hand on the sheet, and gently raising her head, slipped his arm round her neck and drew her close to his breast; and in a few moments she was asleep—the long, deep sleep from which there is no awakening in this life.

The Doctor laid her down and reve-

rently covered her face; then, going over to the window, he drove the little birds away from the sill where they were waiting for their evening meal, closed it, and drew down the blind, and taking Kathe by the hand, slowly and silently led her out of the room.

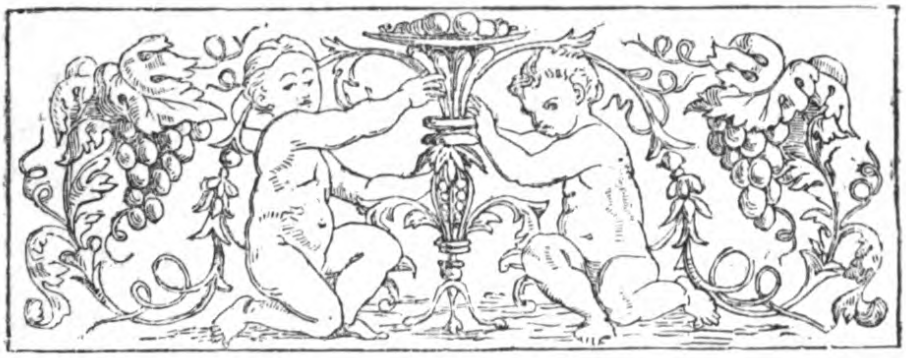
A few hours later when Madame Urach opened the door to look at her dead granddaughter, she appeared at least ten years older than when she last entered that room. She had taken off the black crêpe veil she had worn for a day, and put on in its place the usual white tulle, for "no one," she remarked, "would wear mourning for such a 'villain' as the Counsellor had proved himself to be." She walked over to the bed, raised the handkerchief which covered the face of the dead girl, and her lips trembled as she said in a broken voice, "She is at rest at last; it is best so; *she* is not forced to leave her cherished home

and go among strangers. The bitter, hateful struggle with poverty is spared to —her."

Then Flora silently entered and walked over to the bedside as if no one were in the room but herself. She stooped and kissed Henriette's cold forehead, lingering for a moment to look at her, but taking no notice of the silent pair of watchers on the other side — not even when the Doctor spoke to her, and quietly delivered her dying sister's message, did she give the smallest sign that she had heard the words he uttered. Laying the handkerchief back on the face, she turned and crossed over to the door, where, in answer to the young Doctor's repetition of the message, she slightly bowed her head, drew her rustling skirts together, and closed the door behind her.

Ten minutes later she stood in the hall, ready dressed, waiting for the fly which

was to convey her and her grandmother to the hotel where rooms had been taken for them till they had decided where to permanently take up their abode; for the Villa being in the hands of the bailiffs, to stay there another night was out of the question. Even the cold remains of the poor little invalid were to be removed to the house adjoining the churchyard as soon as darkness had completely fallen on the earth.



CHAPTER X.

ABOUT nine o'clock Kathe stood at the foot of the stone steps weeping bitterly. She had said farewell to the room where she and Henriette had passed many happy hours together, had kissed the cold forehead of the sister whose suffering was at end now, and had silently bidden adieu to the only servant left behind to aid in guarding the house. At the bottom of the steps she stood still, and while involuntarily looking back at the dwelling where such a host of sad circumstances had taken place, she shivered and trembled as she thought of all that had

happened there during the last few days. The soft night wind playing on her forehead did her good, and cooled the fevered flush of her cheeks and eyes. It was a lovely night, with stars shining brightly in the blue heavens—a night when all nature seemed wrapt in silence, when the wind was hushed and the rustling of the branches stilled, as if the awe-inspiring beauty of darkness had calmed the scene into quietude.

Slowly Kathe descended the steps, and turned mechanically in the direction of the Mill-house.

She had reached the avenue, and was standing still for a moment to contemplate the view around her, when she was startled and frightened at the sound of footsteps. Her knees began to shake, but before she had time to move the Doctor's deep sonorous voice broke the silence.

"I am leaving town in a day or two,"

he said, "and I think I am right in saying that you will not come and see my aunt, nor allow me to visit you at the Mill-house ere my departure? Hence, I suppose, this will be the last time we shall find ourselves together—at least for the present——"

"Never again," interrupted Kathe firmly but sadly.

"Nay, Kathe, you are wrong there," he said decidedly. "It would be a separation for ever, if I accepted your promise made to Henriette this afternoon; but I do not want you to be my *sister*—such a relationship I will *not* have. Do you think a man would be content with kind sisterly letters, when he is thirsting for a word of love from his beloved one's lips. But no, I must not say that to-day—I know I must be silent—though my heart is bursting to help you to bear the sorrow which has come to you this very day. I may not speak what is in my heart, but I will say one thing, Kathe: I

could see by the expression of your face when I offered you my hand by Henriette's bedside that you had been told what had happened between Flora and me, and I know that you think I am to blame in the matter. I can bear that — but what I cannot bear is that you should keep that promise of being as a sister to me. Kathe, I know that you have been influenced— that you dare not give me—— I saw by your face," he went on after a slight pause, during which her heart throbbed so fast she thought she should suffocate—"I knew by the way you turned your head aside, that you could not trust yourself to keep that other promise you must have given——"

"Oh, don't! spare me—let me go!" she murmured.

"Kathe," he went on, "whatever that promise was, you must not keep it long. No, thank God, you shall not! for I know that when I come and ask you the truth

that is in your heart, you will not hide it from me. Your true, sweet, womanly nature will assert itself. Kathe, shall I tell you that I saw you standing by the bridge that terrible afternoon—you could not see me but I saw you—saw you lean your head against the support at the side, and burst into a bitter fit of weeping."

Kathe turned to go away, she could not bear him to speak thus, but he caught her hand and held it fast as he went on—

"I saw you, Kathe, and I cannot describe to you how I longed to come over and take you in my arms and press you to my heart. For months I had fought against my feelings —for months I had crushed out of my heart, or rather struggled to do so, the love I felt had crept into it, and for months I had determined to be true and faithful even to the end to my unloved betrothed. But when I saw you standing there—I did not know you were back at the Villa—I de-

termined to give up struggling — I could not help loving you—I made up my mind that I could not marry my betrothed wife, with a raging passion of fierce warm devoted love in my heart for another. No—no! why need I be such a fool? I saw you looking at my house, but your eyes did not seek my aunt's room, Kathe; you——" he checked himself, but he covered her hand with hot burning kisses and his frame heaved with the strength of his feelings, while she, poor girl, leaned against a tree totally unable to utter a sound.

"I will not reproach Flora—I will bear the odium and disgrace that I have brought on myself by breaking off our marriage at the very last moment. I know now, have known ever since the first week following upon our betrothal, that it was the beauteous form and faultless face I worshipped, not the woman herself, whom I had won for my bride. God help me,

Kathe, if I have done wrong, but my whole soul and heart long for you—I told Flora that I loved you——"

"Ah!" it was but a weak cry, the cry of one in pain. He could not understand it, and would have drawn her into his arms, but she resisted him.

Flora knew this, and yet could deceive her to the extent of making her her dupe! She had bought his freedom from his "betrothed wife," but at what a price! The ring was in her pocket, and she knew that she *must* keep her word.

She raised her eyes to heaven and prayed that the bitter temptation might not be too much for her—that she might have strength given her to desist from drinking the contents of the cup of happiness now offered to her lips. But what if *his* happiness were to be the penalty of her faithfulness to Flora?

"You are very quiet, Kathe. Are you

thinking that I ought to hold my tongue at least for to-day? You do not answer, you turn your head away—Kathe—Kathe! I will say no more. You know the desire of my heart, the wish of my life. But yours is an honourable nature, Kathe, and you will not satisfy me now, I know. Well! I will go, I will not urge you to decide, I will leave time to plead for me. I go away now uncertain and unhappy, but—I shall come back, Kathe—don't forget that I shall come back, and you will then tell me. Yes, you *shall* tell me what my own heart prompts me to believe is true—that you love me. Come, I will go with you as far as the Mill-house. Take my arm; a sister could not have more confidence in her brother than you may have in me. Come, and don't let me forget to tell you that my aunt and I will take care of you, if you will trust yourself to us on your journey homewards."

"I am not going back to Dresden," she said simply, accepting his proffered arm and turning in the direction of the Mill-house. She scarcely recognized the sound of her own voice, it was so weak and tuneless, and her whole frame trembled so violently she thought at every step that she must fall.

But she went on, after a short pause—

"When I was in Dresden this last time, I felt very miserable without anything to do but to attend to my music, and the few household duties which I insisted upon sharing with Madame Lukas. I felt then that I needed some earnest purpose for which to work, to which I could devote my energies and time. My life seemed to me so useless; I wanted to be up and doing. And only a few days before dear Henriette telegraphed for me to go to her, I had determined to speak to Moriz about it. I knew the subject would be distaste-

ful to him, and that I should meet with no little opposition from one who considered that I had quite 'purpose' enough in life, if I devoted my energies to making as much show as possible with my immense fortune. Now that is all over—the formidable iron safe has been blown into the air, though I have a very strong suspicion that the contents of the safe had disappeared some time ago. Nanni tells me that I have nothing left; is it so, Doctor?"

"I am afraid there is not much left of——"

"But I have my Mill and the house, and I mean to live there. Perhaps you will be shocked, and think I am going in for strong-mindedness, when I tell you that I have made up my mind to manage the Mill myself. Are you shocked?"

"No; not so much as I should be if any other girl of your age had announced her

intention of taking upon herself such a responsibility. I very much admire independence and energy in a woman, when properly directed; and I know you are not thinking of doing the work you propose for the sake of power, or of making yourself conspicuous among your neighbours. Still, I do not think the position will suit you. You were meant to be the centre of attraction in a home life, Kathe, and not to sit at a desk and keep accounts. Don't commence it—don't try it even; for if you do, some one will be sure to come and run away with you just as you are putting the books in order, and not stop to inquire who is to supply your place at the desk."

Had a ray of light fallen across their path, dissipating the darkness of the avenue for only one moment, during which the Doctor could have seen the expression on his companion's face, he

would there and then have taken her to his heart, and not have let her go till she had promised to be his, and to marry him as soon as possible. But the avenue was dark, and he could not see her face to read there the effect of the silent struggle going on in the young girl's soul. He did not even hear her sigh ; and he attributed her reticence and sadness, the low tone of her voice, and the want of elasticity in her step, to grief at parting in death with the sister she had learned to love so well.

She did not answer the young Doctor's last remark, and he reproached himself for trying to laugh her out of an idea that was evidently no light matter with her, under the sorrowful circumstances in which she was placed.

Presently they left the shadow of the over-hanging avenue, and reached the open meadow, where, on looking around, they could easily distinguish one object from

another in the light of the moon and stars.

"See, Kathe, look over there," whispered the young man, breaking the longest pause which had yet fallen between them, and pressing her hand against his side; "see, there are the two poplars in front of my little cottage. You gathered the first violets under their shade when you were a child, and I promised you in the spring you should always do so if you would. I mean to keep my word. I shall come and stay there during the Easter holidays."

Kathe's heart throbbed too loud for her to trust her voice to speak, for fear it might betray the state of her feelings.

How she longed to put her head against his shoulder, and tell him, just once, that, whether he went or came, she must always love him! But she had bought his freedom with the price of her own happiness; hence

she must silently endure the pain gnawing at her heart, and give no sign of how much she cared for him.

So she did not reply to his remark about the violets, but forced herself to ask—

"Will your aunt go with you to Leipzig?"

"Yes; she intends keeping house for me as long as I remain a bachelor."

Kathe started; but he could not see her pale face, and he fancied she had tripped against a stone. Holding her hand still firmer on his arm, he went on—

"She will be making a great sacrifice in coming to live with me, and I shall be truly thankful when she is able to return to the fresh air of the country. I hope that the loving, brave heart I mean to win, won't keep her too long in town," he said, in a low, earnest tone, scarcely above a whisper.

The light from the Mill windows was streaming now across their path, and brought back to Kathe's recollection a conversation she had had with Susanne relative to Franz's widow and children, when that person had called at the Villa to look after her young mistress in the morning.

The window of the room where the family sat of an evening was dark, the door was closed, the yard deserted, and the only sign of life about the place was the subdued growling of the watch-dog, which sounded dismal and hollow as they drew near.

The young man clasped Kathe's hand in his, as he stood at the gate leading into the yard.

"I feel as if I were sending you into banishment," he said softly. "Spare me the pain of knowing you are alone this evening with the weight of this sorrow

upon you, and come with me. My aunt will love and cherish you as if you were her own child. Will you, Kathe?" There was deep passion in his voice, but his face she could not see.

"No, no!" she cried out piteously. "Let me go. Do you think I shall pass the night in bitter useless weeping, that you ask me to go home with you to your aunt's? I have no time for that, even if I would. Let me go—go. I must see the widow to-night, she and her children have no one to comfort them but me. I had better go there at once," and she pointed to the darkened door.

"Kathe, dear beloved Kathe!" he said, pressing her hand in both his against his breast. "Must I let you go? It is very hard, but I must if you wish it. I dare not check you in your work of comforting the widow. So go, but take care of yourself. Keep the bandage on your head for

a day or two longer. And now good-bye till Easter; when the winter snows are gone, when the earth wakes up from her cold lethargy and all nature rejoices in the coming warmth and summer, then, then I shall come back. Till then don't forget me, and think sometimes of me. How I shall long to see you, Kathe; and do not let slander or an evil tongue make you doubt me!"

"No, never!" the words were uttered with a sob, and she put both her hands into his. He heard the sob, and although he did not fully understand its meaning and chiefly attributed it to sorrow for Henriette's death, he suddenly let her hands fall, and, clasping his arms around her trembling form, drew her close to his breast and kissed her lips and cheeks and eyes with passionate fervour, and the next moment he was gone, leaving her with beating heart, throbbing pulse, and tear-

less eye to carry out her intention of visiting the widow and her children in their hour of bereavement.

Three days later, Dr. Bruck and his aunt left town to take up their residence in Leipzig. Kathe had not seen him again since the night he left her so abruptly at the Mill-house door, but "auntie" had called upon her once, and stayed with her a whole evening.

The day following Henriette's funeral, Madame Urach and Flora also left town, the former to pass a month at one of the baths to recruit her "shattered nerves," the latter to "study medicine"—so it was reported among her acquaintances—in one of the large towns of Switzerland.

CHAPTER XI.

MORE than a year had elapsed since the cold March morning when Kathe Mangold, accompanied by Dr. Bruck, walked through the linden avenue on her way to her guardian's house, the sole heiress of her grandfather's immense fortune.

Whoever walked along that avenue now and cared to turn to his right as he passed onwards towards the house, would see a row of pretty cottages in the distance, at the bend of the high-road from the town. These cottages were inhabited by the men at the spinning factory with their wives

and children. The ground on which they stood was the waste corner bit of land belonging to the Mill garden, which Kathe had once earnestly entreated her guardian to allow her to place at the disposal of the men, who had clamoured to have their dwellings built nearer the scene of their daily work at the spinning factory, when Madame Urach and Flora had refused them the privilege of building on the outer side of the park.

The townsfolk were delighted at the erection of this row of houses. Formerly, at this special bend of the road stones and rubbish of various kinds had accumulated, making the thoroughfare look untidy, and spoiling the effect of the large well-kept garden behind. But now the pathway was in excellent order, the cottages were clean and trim, flowers ornamented the windows, and the small gardens in front of each tenement were neatly railed round with

green staves, against which various creeping plants were encouraged to grow. Hence the cottages were a great improvement to that special portion of the old estate, and were regarded with an immense amount of pride by their owners and their owners' benefactress, Kathe Mangold, the proprietor of the Mill.

Kathe Mangold had carried out her wish, and installed herself mistress of the Mill. She started her new plan by engaging a thorough man of business as head foreman of the works, and putting herself under his guidance to learn the details of the business. By dint of strong perseverance, constant attention to every detail, and determination to accomplish her self-imposed task, added to her quick perception and natural aptitude for orderly habits, she soon succeeded in mastering the difficulties of her peculiar position, and gained sufficient insight into the working of the concern to insure re-

spect and confidence from those about her, and to increase the importance of the Mill itself in the eyes of those merchants from whom the grain was purchased. Day after day she was to be found at her desk overlooking accounts, dictating business letters, and superintending the general management of everything that belonged to the welfare of her subordinates and their work.

One of the first acts of her newly-assumed authority was to instal Franz's widow in a couple of rooms at the side of the Mill, insure a small pension for her use during life, or until she married again, and to employ her as an assistant to Susanne in the cooking, besides giving her the management of such portion of the tiny dairy as was required for the daily consumption of the mistress's small household.

Shortly after the Counsellor's death, when her guardian's affairs had been examined

into, and the full result of his speculations made known to his creditors, it was found out that Kathe's surmise as to the loss of her own fortune was perfectly correct. Not a penny remained to her of all the thousands left her by the miller, but the Mill and house and ground on which they stood, and an odd hundred or two that had been placed to her credit in a Dresden bank some months previous to the catastrophe. She did not murmur, but accepted her fate, glad even that she had it in her power to work, and to help others.

Thus the winter passed without any outward change coming to the young girl in the daily routine of her lonely, hard-working life. Now and again she would slip away from her desk and wander in the sunshine of a brighter day than usual across the park and down to the river-side. She would stand and watch the old-fashioned house with the golden weather-cock, look

at its closed windows and cheerless aspect, and wonder if the time would ever come when she should be called upon to give up the ring in her possession to its future mistress, and see a bright happy face flitting in and out through the open doors.

That Dr. Bruck had loved her she did not doubt for a second now, but she would not, dared not think that he would come back to her, as his passionate words had implied the night on which he had parted from her.

She had often heard from his aunt, during the six months which had elapsed since then; but not a line had reached her from the Doctor himself. He had faithfully kept his word so far, not to disturb her till the following Easter; and but for the increasing celebrity of his name, which caused him to be constantly mentioned in the weekly papers, and a remark from time to time about her nephew in his aunt's letters,

Kathe would have heard nothing at all about him, and certainly not have known if he still had any regard for her.

While the days and weeks were growing into months, and Kathe bravely carried out the task she had set herself to do, she had no idea that her actions were keenly watched with warm interest by several people in town. But it was nevertheless true ; and many who had regarded her coldly in the days when she was reputed an heiress, had lately tried to win the young mistress of the Mill from her solitary life, and to induce her to join their home circles when her daily work was at an end.

Amongst the few who to Kathe's extreme astonishment formally called upon her to renew their old acquaintance, and to demand her friendship, if she would kindly extend it to them, was the grandmother of her half-sisters, Madame Urach.

The old lady had returned to town towards the close of winter, and engaged a couple of rooms in a narrow street, where she lived secluded on her very narrow means, away from the world and society, and where her existence was scarcely remembered by half a dozen of the host of people whom she had so often entertained in princely style at the Villa. She had not been in her new apartments many days before she heard of Kathe's doings at the Mill, and of the success which was attending her efforts to make a comfortable income out of the proceeds of her well-ground sacks of flour. So she forthwith put on her bonnet, hired a fly, and drove out to the Mill-house to "do her duty to that young girl, her dear son-in-law's youngest child, and look after her a little."

Kathe received her kindly, placed her in the old-fashioned easy-chair by the stove, and ordered fragrant coffee and sweet cakes

to be brought to her guest. When the old lady was rested and refreshed after her drive, she took her over the work-rooms, and showed her the different machines employed in the sifting and grinding of the grain. And finally when they returned to the house, Kathe slipped out of the room, packed a basket full of eggs and fresh butter, and a home-cured ham, and had it carried to the fly. When her guest was going, she begged the old lady so warmly to come and see her whenever she felt dull at home, that Madame Urach's eyes filled with tears, for perhaps the first time in her life, and she could not find a word to say to express her thanks for this unexpected kindness on the part of a girl whose stay with her she had formerly made so miserable.

Easter arrived at last, and with it several workmen, to put in order the old-fashioned house by the river-side.

Kathe had not been out for several days, but on Easter-eve she walked as usual down by the river, while the workmen were getting their dinner. What was her surprise, on nearing the house, to observe that fresh clean blinds were hanging at every window, that the garden had been "done up," and that the general appearance of the place betokened a return of its inmates, or if not their return, at least the expectation of their arrival. While she wandered dreamily around the attractive spot, she met one of the late servants at the Villa, who informed her that the old house had been partly re-furnished for the reception of a lady guest who was to accompany Frau Diakonus from Leipzig, and that both ladies were expected to arrive by the afternoon train, and intended staying some time at the house. Then the maid rattled on about the beauty of this unknown guest, and how that special

orders had come from the Doctor to have everything in readiness by Good-Friday, and that there was "such a fuss" being made over this young lady, who was to have the best room, &c., "and a new carpet to cover the floor."

Kathe turned away as quickly as she could; she did not care to listen to the gossip, for her heart ached and her temples throbbed, and she felt more inclined to burst into tears than to join in expressing pleasure at all this news.

"Who can she be?" thought Kathe to herself, as she slowly retraced her steps to the Mill; "some one very dear to aunt and nephew, or the dear old lady, who dislikes visitors in her house, would not bring her down here with her on a lengthy visit!" and the girl sighed deeply.

When Kathe reached home, her heart was very heavy; she would have given anything to be alone and quiet, but that was

quite out of the question for several hours to come. Her work had to be done, several letters to be written, and an important matter of business to be discussed with her foreman, before she felt herself at liberty to indulge in the luxury of her own thoughts.

Then as the afternoon waned and she went into the dining-room to get a cup of tea to ease the pain and throb in her head which had prevented her doing any work, she met Madame Urach's maid with a letter for her to read and return.

Sending the maid into the kitchen to refresh herself with a cup of coffee after her walk, and ordering Susanne to fill the returned empty basket with fresh cake and eggs, the young girl wearily sat down to peruse the letter. It was from Flora, and addressed to her grandmother.

Once or twice before Madame Urach had sent Kathe a letter to read from her

half-sister, and by this means she had learned that Flora had given up the study of medicine, and was roaming about from one place to another in search of a society which would acknowledge her talents and appreciate her natural gifts.

But to-day Kathe was in no hurry to open the envelope lying on her lap; her thoughts were all in a whirl, and the paper seemed to burn her fingers. She rose, threw the letter on the table, and going over to the piano tried to play a soft low melody. But it was of no use; she could do nothing to-day. She opened the window and let the cool wind pass over her hot forehead, then with trembling fingers and burning cheeks she snatched up the letter, opened the envelope, and began to read. It was dated from Berlin, and ran,—

"I dare say you will laugh triumphantly, my dear grandmamma, when I tell you

that I have done what I think for the best, and engaged myself to Karl von Stetten, whom you once were so anxious for me to marry. He is uglier and more vulgar than ever, and ornaments his full-moon face with a pair of blue spectacles. Fi donc! I shall always be ashamed of walking by his side, but he has cared for me a long time, and by the death of his cousin, has come into the family property, and is now the head of his house. So I don't think I have done so badly in——"

The letter fell from Kathe's hand.

"Leo Bruck is free—free—at last! He may come and see me now," she cried in a tone that was scarcely above a murmur, it was so low in its eager joyousness. "Can it be true that I dare think of him now?" she went on to herself. "These past seven long months have been terribly hard to bear. I thought I had crushed out of life every loving longing for him, and

yet — yet ——" She clasped her hands together and turned pale as the thought crossed her, "Supposing after all she is only duping us—that this is another of her cruel tormenting ways to——"

She picked up the letter and read the words again and again. Yes, it must be true; he has rank, wealth, all Flora cares about, she said to herself; and then she went on to read how the wedding-day was fixed for Whit-Monday, and that her trousseau was finished, and that she hoped "dear grandmamma" would come and be present at the ceremony. Then Kathe's cheek paled, and her knees trembled beneath her as she read further:—

"I stayed a few days in Leipzig on my road here. Perhaps it will interest you to hear that the celebrated and far-famed Hofrath, Professor Bruck, has not only succeeded in making himself a favourite physician in the courtly circle, but has won

the heart of a beautiful lady of rank. I am told that he is privately betrothed to the noble patient, who gave him her heart in return for his skilful performance of an operation which saved her life. Her parents are delighted at the match, and 'auntie' is charmed with her nephew's good fortune. I saw them all together at the theatre a few nights ago, and if I mistake not, auntie wore *thread* gloves! The girl is very beautiful—but hers is a wax-doll sort of beauty—and he? well, I don't mind telling you, grandmamma, that I bit my lips with vexation to see him standing so calm and dignified behind his lady-love's chair, as if he had a right to all the good fortune which has fallen to his lot, and as if he had never, by so much as a hair's breadth, swerved from the path of honour—he—the scoundrel! Give Kathe the enclosed——"

Ah! yes, she had not noticed the small

folded bit of paper which had slipped out of the letter and lay on the rug at her feet. Picking it up she saw the words, "To Kathe Mangold."

For a moment her head swam, and her fingers trembled so violently she could not open the paper. Recovering herself with an effort she read :—

"Have the kindness to hand over to Countess Witte at once the ring I entrusted to your care, or you can fling it into the water with the other one if you like.

"FLORA."

CHAPTER XII.

KATHE suddenly became very still; she mechanically folded the enclosure and the letter together and replaced them in the envelope. Could the Countess Witte be the guest expected at the house by the river? She shook her head as the thought crossed her brain. Her eyes brightened and her cheeks flushed when his words came back to her memory.

"I shall return at Easter," he had said, and the young girl knew that he would keep his word, and that he would come. He would not break a promise given to

the miller's grand-daughter for the highest born lady in the land. Besides, had he not said that he loved *her*—Kathe? She blushed as she recalled the loving passionate manner in which he had clasped her to his heart. Doubt him? No, never—never.

She sprang from her seat and went over to the window, her eyes wandering with a happy trusting expression to the spot where the old house stood. How her face flushed with excitement as she caught sight of the flag drooping over the roof by the side of the golden weather-cock!

The widow with her guest must have arrived! Should she run down to welcome her back, throw her arms round her neck and whisper her delight at having her very dearest friend near her again?

She must calm herself first—her glowing cheeks and beating heart would betray her to the keen searching eyes of the dear old

"auntie." Yes, she would grow calm first!

For a moment she watched the dogs in the yard barking at a beggar to whom Susanne had just thrown a handful of bread, and then she glanced round the large comfortable apartment which she had converted into a sort of dining-room and library, the room in which she wrote her business letters, where she allowed no one to enter uninvited, and where she loved to sit and think or read when her work was done, and she might enjoy a leisure hour if she felt so inclined.

She quietly went over to her desk, sat down, and taking up a pen began to write.

"Messrs. Schilling and Co., Hamburg."

How her hand shook! no one would possibly be able to read such a trembling scrawl. She threw down her pen and

leaned her hot aching head on her hands.

Presently a cool puff of wind blew across her burning cheek. She looked up to see where it came from and saw—*him*, the one being in all the world whom she most longed to see.

"Leo! I knew you would come!" she cried, with a joyous ring in her voice that told the joy of her heart, and the next moment she was clasped in his arms.

"My darling!" was all he said at first. He kissed her again and again, on ears and cheek and hair till she turned her face from his breast and timidly raised her sweet lips to his, and in that first passionate clinging kiss her fate was sealed for ever.

"Well I never!" cried Susanne at the door, astonished to find her young mistress half hidden in Dr. Bruck's embrace; but a

glance at his happy face reassured her, and she endeavoured to close the door without being heard. But she was too late. Kathe had seen her, and withdrew from her lover's encircling arm blushing painfully.

The Doctor laughed, and holding her hand said—

"No, no, Kathe, I won't let you go yet. I am afraid you will repent that rash movement of yours when I entered the room, and return to the old reserve. I have you now, and I mean to keep you. Come here, Susanne," he said to the old servant whom he had seen enter; "come here and shake hands with me, your mistress has promised to be my wife."

"Good gracious, sir! Well now, really I *am* glad! and I knew nothing at all about it, but I am glad, and—and I hope you'll get married quick and be that happy——"

Wiping a tear from her eye with her apron, she bustled out of the room as fast as she could, to publish the good news to every one she met.

"Now, Kathe," said the young man, "Easter has arrived, and your work here is over. How I have longed for this day, words fail me to express. Darling, my darling, I thought the time would never pass! It was so very hard to go without a single line or word from you. You wrote to my aunt, and those letters were my only comfort, though you rarely, if ever, mentioned my name; and then I knew that it would be best to allow a short while to elapse before I addressed you in any form, for your own sake. But tell me why you did not send me even one message? you promised to be my sister, surely—surely——"

He suddenly stopped, and his forehead grew a dark red and his brows contracted

as his eyes fell on the well-known writing of the letter lying on the table.

Kathe drew her hand from his clasp, and laid it over the paper. Why need he know now of the cruel torture she had suffered through Flora's heartlessness? There was no impediment in the way to her happiness now, why then tell him anything about the past? But he firmly lifted her hand from the table, and with a glance at her troubled face said firmly—

"Kathe, I will not have any secret between us. Thank God, mystery and reserve shall be at an end where you and I are concerned. There is some secret in that paper, let me see it."

He read the letter, laid it on the table, and putting his arms round the girl, he pressed her close to his heart and said—

"Now I understand the meaning of your words that day — now I know how you

sacrificed yourself for me. Darling, can I ever repay you the pain and misery I so unconsciously made you suffer? Kathe, you love me? I have seen it in your eyes —heard it in your voice, but tell me you love me with your lips. Do you, Kathe?"

She nestled closer to him and said softly—

"I think I love you too much, Leo." Then, half laughing and half inclined to cry, she added: "But what about the beautiful Countess Witte? Is she not going to stay with auntie and occupy the newly-furnished room?"

"No," he answered, laughing; "I did not wish you to know from the people about that I was coming, but that room is for me —just for the present. As to the pretty little Countess, she is so grateful for my having successfully operated on a troublesome tumour on her head, that she is a shade too demonstrative in her delight, and

speaks of me in terms that perhaps have led people to imagine she and I care for each other. She is a dear little woman, and is devoted to a young sailor who is coming home this summer. You will soon learn to know her, for I mean to take my wife back with me after the holidays."

"Leo!"

"Well, my love? Our engagement has lasted seven long months—surely that has given you time to consider, and if not—humph!—you must think about it afterwards," he added, laughing and encircling her face with his two hands. "Come here and tell me if you would like to stand by my side at the altar, there," he pointed to a church spire rising beyond the trees. "I love that little village, and the minister is a great friend of mine."

"Do with me as you will, Leo," she replied softly with such loving tender-

ness in her tone. "But my duties here——"

"You shall not cast up another line; your foreman, or rather the manager, must look after your interests for you till——"

"Just as you like. When I return I will formally entrust him with the management of the Mill; he is a true, honest man."

"Have you heard that Moriz has been seen in America?" asked Dr. Bruck later on in the evening, when he and Kathe were walking under the avenue, and the lights from the windows of the Villa told them that the new family living there were at home.

"Yes, besides I have known all along that he was alive." And she related how she had seen the workman in his blouse driving the deer across the meadows to the high-road about a quarter of an hour before

she was struck down when the explosion took place, and added: "A few days ago Franz's widow received an anonymous letter enclosing fifty pounds from California. She wonders who her unknown benefactor is, but I knew immediately from whom the money came."

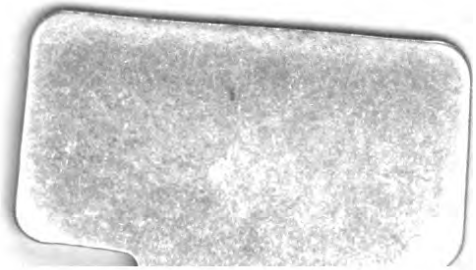
A few steps farther brought the young couple in front of the old house by the river-side, and a minute later the noble old lady, Frau Diakonus, had clasped her loving arms around her "dearest little daughter," and whispered—

"I would rather you married my Leo than any other girl in the world. How he loves you, Kathe!"

"And how I love *him!*" replied Kathe softly, and kissed her old friend's cheek.

Before closing the hall door and going in for the evening meal, Dr. Bruck called Kathe to his side. Putting his arm round her he said earnestly—

"Listen, Kathe, to the bells! They are ringing in Easter Sunday—and you and I are together—at last."

THE END.

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