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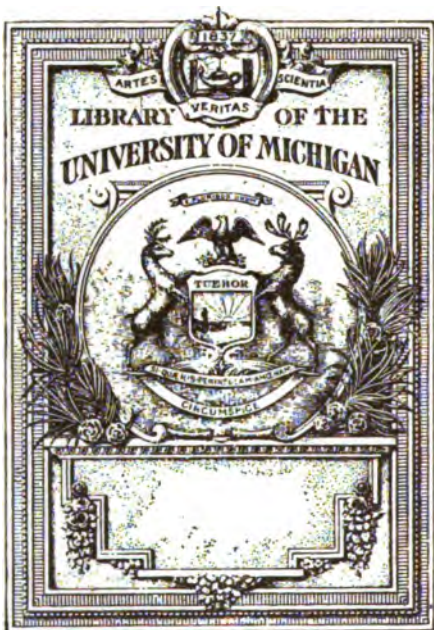
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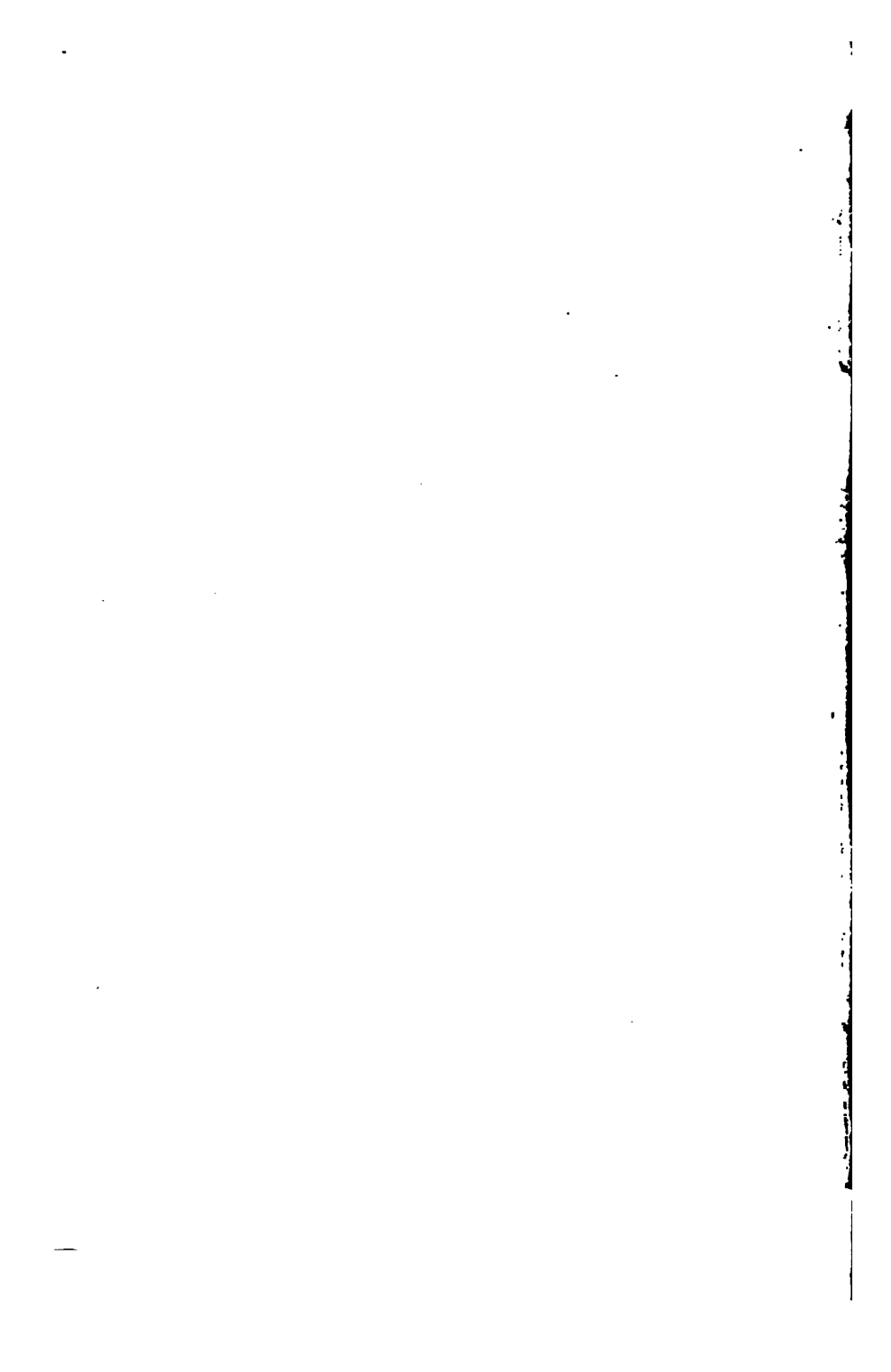
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THE BLACK MASS

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A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

BY



FREDERIC BRETON

AUTHOR OF

"GOD FORSAKEN", "THE TRESPASSES OF TWO", "A HEROINE
IN HOMESPUN", ETC.

TRANSLATOR OF "THE FORGOTTEN ISLES"



"Was man nicht versteht, besitzt man nicht"

LONDON
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Act the First

OUT OF THE WORLD

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THE BLACK MASS.

Act the first.

OUT OF THE WORLD.

I.

WHILE generally popular among the women of his acquaintance, who appreciated the enthusiasm which he could display over the merest domestic trifles, such as the hanging of a picture or the colour of an art fabric, Raymond Eager was declared by most men to be somewhat eccentric. But the judgment must be discounted by a little natural though unexpressed jealousy, on their part, of his almost universal power of appreciation. For 'eccentric' read 'erratic', which he was admitted to be by his most ardent admirers.

"Why is Eager unlike a leopard?" was a riddle once propounded by his friend Jermyn Brand, the answer being, "Because he's always changing his spots."

The observation was passably true for a would-be humorous remark, but Brand had shrewdly added that spots, after all, were only skin-deep.

"At bottom," said he, "Eager is conventional, and

circumstances will rub off the superficial Bohemianism. Experience is the unfailing depilatory."

That process of rubbing off, which leaves some of us in so bare a condition in middle age, began for Eager on a certain hot August afternoon, when leaning over the parapet of London Bridge, the sound of the lapping water and the sight of the vessels moored in the Pool, infected him with the fever of travel.

Like the student in Andersen's story, he had visions of distant seas and mountain solitudes, and the Goloshes of Fortune fitted him easily enough to allow him to realise his desire, which, after all, was quite modest for an age of world-records, not extending beyond a cruise to Norway or a visit to Germany or Switzerland.

Accordingly, that self-same day week found him on board a cross-channel steamer.

He occasionally eked out his small income by a fugitive wooing of literature, pending the time when he should pay court to that difficult mistress in dead earnest, and his journey was undertaken with an idea that he would find more inspiration for the projected masterpiece in a foreign country than in England. Otherwise, he would have gone to Swangate, the small town on the south coast where not only his parents lived, but also the girl whom he was credited with the intention of making his wife. But Swangate was too familiar to be inspiring, and his imagination needed the stimulus of novelty. From his friend Brand he had heard of Kreuzdorf as the chief village of a district

quite off the beaten tourist track, in the heart of a wild forest region, where save for a casual travelling student or an itinerant pedlar, visitors from the outer world were perhaps even rarer than angels.

In the cool forest, by the margin of lonely pine-reflecting tarns, or on the protruding ridges of the mountains,—there, if anywhere, he thought, would he find a suitable scene for the work with which he hoped to make his mark on a plastic generation. The scene once found, the actors would appear and the drama be enacted.

The prospect of quitting the amenities of convention and possibly getting into touch with the mute mystery of peasant life, pleased him not a little, and it was with a faint reflection of the feelings of one who enters for the first time an undiscovered country, that he found himself in the bifurcated street composing the village of Kreuzdorf, and, stopping to rest at the foot of the wayside Calvary, which gives the place its name, looked round about him on the quaint wooden houses, and, beyond them, to the shaggy slopes of forest which culminated in the lofty crest of the Tannenberg.

"Eureka!" he light-heartedly exclaimed, as he hied him to the Hotel "Zum wilden Schwein", in search of the bodily refreshment, failing which even enthusiasm grows weary.

The hotel was merely a *Gastwirthschaft* or inn, but it pleased Raymond better than many a more pretentious caravanserai. He made a meal off the mysterious dish, known to the uninitiated as *Hasenpfeffer*.

and washed it down with lager-beer, with the zest and generous appetite of a schoolboy home for the holidays. Afterwards, he thought he could not better walk off his superfluous energy than by making an excursion through the forest to the Tannenberg, the view from the summit of which, he was assured by his host, was *famos*.

Thus apparently by a simply accidental excess of high spirits, he was brought to the house in the forest, which marked for him the beginning of his remarkable experience.

"Destiny laughs when she sees men hesitate!" was an aphorism which he afterwards inflicted on his friend Jermyn Brand.

She must have been amused that afternoon when she saw Raymond Eager on the summit of the Tannenberg, by one of the rudely carved wooden crucifixes with which the pious peasantry mark all the salient features of the landscape. He had reached the spot by a winding cart track of easy gradient, and, after admiring the view, was about to descend by the same way, when it occurred to him that his excursion would be agreeably diversified if he were to leave the track and endeavour to pilot a more direct and less conventional course through the forest.

He stood in doubt for a moment, knowing that the forest was not only dense and wide, but was also a hunting domain where wild boars and wolves, and even bears, might be encountered. But the mere knowledge that such creatures, as it were, brushed his coatsleeve, gave Raymond a pleasurable

thrill, and he boldly turned his back on the beaten pathway and uplifted his face to inhale the balsamic breath of the pine trees.

Alone in the forest! It was an experience well worth the journey from England. The wind soughed faintly in the branches overhead and occasionally some inferior rodent rustled its timorous way through the undergrowth. But otherwise, there was not a sound. The fallen pine-needles provided a soft noiseless carpet for the wayfarer's feet, and no birds enlivened the stillness by their chirpings. The place was as silent and its endless aisles were as dark as a gothic crypt.

At first Raymond rejoiced in the strangeness of it all, and began mentally to compose a letter to the girl at Swangate, describing the impression produced on him by this grave, sweet solemnity. But after an hour's tramping, such stillness grew monotonous and oppressive, and he looked anxiously for a break in the trees. He began to regret that he had let his love of novelty entice him off the road, entertaining more than a suspicion that he had lost his way, when his eye was caught by a rudely carved arrowhead on the bark of a pine tree.

His spirits revived at once.

"A blaze!" thought he, promising himself the treat of reminding his old playmate at Swangate of the backwoods adventure-stories, which had been one of the delights of their golden age.

He pursued his way more hopefully in the direction indicated by the arrow-head, and was presently

rewarded by coming upon a second, similar, cuneiform signpost. Further yet, his expectation of reaching a clearing was confirmed by a sign board nailed to a pine branch, bearing the half obliterated inscription, *Zum Försthaus*—To the Forest House.

The very idea of arriving at a house made Raymond keenly conscious of an intense thirst which had been growing upon him since early in the afternoon. Visions of tall earthenware mugs of ice-cold lager or sparkling mineral water and Rhine wine, insensibly stimulated his lagging steps to such good purpose that, not ten minutes later, he heard the, to him, welcome sound of the barking of dogs. Pushing forward with an alacrity worthy of his name, he soon came in sight of a thatched wooden house in the midst of a clearing, partially railed off by a palisade of split pine logs. Six dogs of various breeds came bounding forth to warn off or welcome the stranger, but their effusiveness was not disconcerting, and only the seventh animal, a black boarhound of grim aspect, made Raymond feel at all nervous. Holding itself aloof from its demonstrative companions, the creature eyed him so sullenly that he insensibly tightened his grip on his walking stick, when his attention was diverted from all other considerations by the appearance of a girl at the door of the Försthaus. Even his thirst, except perhaps that thirst for beauty which is the most moving spirit of mortality, was forgotten, such was his surprise to see so unexpectedly graceful and pretty a hostess.

II.

"ENTER," said the girl. "Thou must be weary with wandering through our forest."

Raymond Eager needed no second invitation, and crossed the threshold of the forest-house.

A few minutes later, he was drinking deep draughts of foaming lager beer from a quaintly designed earthenware mug, and quaffing more dangerous refreshment from the blue eyes of the girl who served him.

The room was cool and spacious. The walls were hung with sundry trophies of the chase in the form of wild boars' tusks, wolves' heads, and the shaggy peltry of a brown bear or two. The forester's dogs, which had trooped in at the stranger's heels, sprawled lazily on the tiled hearth round the great Nuremberg stove. The animals generally paid little attention to the visitor, but the black boar hound, which had behaved so menacingly to Raymond, as he entered the courtyard, still watched the young man with a look of latent suspicion.

Happening to glance in the animal's direction, he met the creature's eye, and instinctively looked away, as a man does when he accidentally encounters

the eyes of a stronger nature than his own. The intelligence in the hound's gaze seemed to him almost uncanny, though he was annoyed with himself for perceiving it.

The girl laughed softly at his manifest discomposure.

"Art thou, a man, afraid of a dog?" she asked.

"I am an Englishman, and fear nothing but God!" answered Raymond.

"Ach! God does not dwell in our forest," said the girl.

"Both in the forest and in your heart!" was Raymond's reply, though he did not know why he should have given so evangelical an answer.

"In my heart!" repeated the girl, "I doubt it, for is it not written—at least so I remember hearing my father once quoting from some book—that no man can serve two masters?"

"No *man* can," retorted Eager, "but many women do!"

"Perhaps thou art right, but let us talk of pleasanter subjects. What brings thee wandering over the world so wide? Art thou a travelling workman looking for employment?"

Raymond smiled and shook his head.

"Art thou a pedlar then, and hast thou left thy pack in the village? I am sorry, for we do not see many pretty things on the Tannenberg!"

"No," said Raymond. "I'm merely a traveller, though I regret having no pretty things to show you."

"A traveller!" mused the girl. "But surely thou

must come on business? What else would bring thee across the sea, away from home and friends, to wander alone in the forest?"

"I have no business and why I come is a mystery even to myself. But sometimes—though I daresay you won't understand the feeling—one wants to escape from the rush and hurry of the world and be alone with the natural and primitive. That's why I come to your forest! It is a contrast to the places where I have spent most of my time in recent years. When one is satiated with the artificial, one goes to the natural. It is only a reaction—the love of variety and pursuit of pleasure in a form supposed to be less blameable than the conventional. I...."

Raymond checked himself abruptly, struck by the absurdity of inflicting such philosophical platitudes on a mere forest girl.

But the maiden stood gazing at him with a look of strange curiosity.

"Novelty! Love of pleasure!" she repeated. "Are those the objects which have brought thee to the Försthaus? I was taught by my father that pleasure avoided those who sought for it, and then I was told that it was useless to seek for pleasure or novelty as nothing was really new and nothing gave pleasure for long. Is that true, dost thou think?"

Raymond laughed.

"What cynic was abroad in this forest to tell you such a stale truth or untruth as that?"

"My father said so, and then the Herr Baron!"

"The Herr Baron? Who is he?"

The girl's eyes dilated with surprise, and for the first time Raymond noted the peculiar gaze which ever afterwards created such a strange impression upon him that he seemed never to be able to grow accustomed to it. The pupils appeared to contract almost to a point while the irises widened to a disc of azure—a blaze of blue, he called it, for, soft as the colour was, it had an intensity only to be compared to that of flame. It reminded Eager of certain effects of sunlight on the deep ultramarine of the crater-lakes or *maare*, on the bare summits of the volcanic Eifel. Those waters slumber over extinct fires, but the eyes of this girl seemed to veil active forces of equally destructive possibilities.

As these comparisons flashed through his mind, the maiden repeated, "The Herr Baron? Why, he is the Baron. Hast thou not heard of him? He is our over-lord! He owns all this forest and the village besides! Surely thou must know of his castle, Schloss Wolfenheim! He is Freiherr von und zu Wolfenheim!"

"With such a position and such an estate, it seems rather absurd of him to say that it is useless to seek happiness!"

"Ach! But he did not say it was useless to seek for happiness, but useless to search for pleasure!"

"What distinction did he draw between the two ideas?"

"He? None! It is only I myself who seem to

feel there must be a distinction, but perhaps it is a foolish notion."

"Not at all, but I can't help wondering where you got it from."

"One gets many strange notions in our forest. But then, you see, my father is also in his way a philosopher. He was at the university and in the army. He also should live in his castle, but it is a ruin, and the land has been sold. That is why he acts as forester to the Baron, who was a friend of his. They were young men in Berlin together."

"Perhaps that is where they bought their experience about the futility of chasing pleasure," murmured Raymond.

"What?" asked the girl.

"Oh, nothing! Is the Herr Baron at his castle now?"

"I do not know. He comes and goes like the wind in the trees. One never knows where he is. That is why the peasants are afraid of him, I think!"

"Are they?"

The girl laughed—rather unfeelingly, it seemed to Raymond.

"They are as afraid of him as.... as"—her laugh suddenly failed, her face clouded, and she concluded with the words, "as *I* am!"

Raymond's face lit up with curiosity and his lips began to shape a further question, but the maiden raised her finger.

At the same moment the young man's eyes fell on the dog, which was still regarding him with a look of malevolence.

"I fear I must go now!" he said abruptly, draining off the last drop of his beer.

"So soon? Wilt thou not stay, at least till my father returns? He will guide thee back through the forest, for daylight is already fading and it is not good to be alone in the forest after nightfall."

The request seemed to Raymond like a temptation, in so far as while he was with this girl he seemed to be losing his self-possession.

"No! I must go! I am less afraid of the dark forest than of...."

"Of what? Hast thou heard the gossip of the villagers about the Försthaus?"

"No! I have heard no gossip. I only reached Kreuzdorf this afternoon, and came out for a walk in the forest."

"Then why be in such haste. Ach! I see at what thou art looking. It is poor Teufel of whom thou art afraid!"

"Teufel! Is that the dog's name?"

"Yes! He is so black and so intelligent. It was the village people who said, when they saw him, 'Ach! *Gott im Himmel!* what Teufel is that?' So I gave him the name. It means nothing. But I will put the dog out of the door, if it is him whom thou dost fear!"

"Fear!" said Raymond testily. "If I were afraid of anything, it would hardly be of a dog, as long as I had a stick which could be used for something else besides walking."

"Then why not stay? Do stay! I am alone and..."

She looked at him pleadingly, and Raymond, remembering the other girl to whom he had bidden farewell on leaving England a few weeks previously, felt as if he were falling under a magic spell. All the strange legends of Teutonic folklore came crowding into his mind, Undine, the Lorelei, and strange beings in fair human forms whom men had wooed to their own undoing. He was at once repelled and fascinated, and at the same time was conscious of a painful anxiety, which he took for impartial solicitude, that the girl should prove to be the bright, innocent human creature, bespoken by her youth and beauty.

"I would stay," said he, "but...."

"But what?"

"I dare not. I was wrong to say I feared nothing, I fear..... *thee!*"

"Ach! Thou sayest *thee!* Thou art friendly at last."

Then it struck Eager that from the very first, the girl had addressed him by the familiar second person singular, as if he were a relative or a friend of old standing. The thought made his heart burn.

"Good-bye!" said he desperately, striding to the door.

"Friends should never say that!"

"What then?"

"*Auf Wiedersehen!* Till we meet again, of course!"

"But it seems very unlikely that we shall meet again!"

"Wilt thou not return then to see me? It is lonely all the day at the Försthaus and..."

"Have you no other friends then? Surely a maiden as well favoured as thou art, should not lack friends or ... lovers!"

And Raymond laughed, but the girl looked startled and turned upon him the same wide, intense gaze, which had so affected him a few moments previously.

"Lovers!" she repeated thoughtfully. "I used to wish I had a lover, but now it is too late, I suppose!"

"Too late!" exclaimed the young man. "Are you already married?"

"Married? No!"

"Are you betrothed then?"

"No! I don't think it can be called betrothal!"

"Then, if you are not married and not betrothed, what do you mean by saying it is too late to have a lover?"

"It is not too late for me to *have* one, but perhaps it is too late to keep one!"

"What sort of riddles are you talking?" asked Eager, tantalised by the girl's strange replies.

"Riddles no one can answer unless they have the master-key!" she observed.

Then seeing the perplexity on the young man's face, she broke into a rippling laugh which sounded to Raymond like the sound of a clock chime.

"Don't look so astonished and so mortified! Did I not tell thee I have never had a lover?" she continued. "It is true there was Hans, the innkeeper's

son. He looked at me in a silly way and tried to put his arm round me, but then he was drunk, and he frightened me. Besides, he is a common peasant, and my blood is as good as the Baron's own. Yet," and her voice became serious again, "I should like well to have a lover. He might help me to obey nature and be good."

"Good?—I am sure you are good!" exclaimed Raymond. "There is not much temptation to be otherwise in this forest, I should imagine. Besides, one has only to look at thy face to..."

The girl tossed her head, the first sign of coquetry that Eager had noticed in her.

"I do not believe thee! Thou dost not mean it!" she said. "If thou really thought that I were good, thou wouldst come to see me again. Good people, so I have heard, are rare even in England, and in our forest they are rarer still."

"I will come then," said Eager, excusing the rash promise by the sophistry that it was as well for a man to have a definite object in his walks. Giving him one of her wide glances, the girl smiled and held out her hand.

"*Auf Wiedersehen* then!" said she, and "*Auf Wiedersehen!*" was the man's reply.

Therewith he strode resolutely away from the door, and soon found himself back on the cart road, leading to the village of Kreuzdorf.

III.

WALKING swiftly down the road after leaving the Försthaus, Raymond saw ahead of him and soon overtook a clergyman in cassock and shovel hat, who was pacing homewards thoughtfully in the sunset light, one eye on the beauty of the foliage and the other on his closely printed breviary.

Doffing his cap and murmuring the conventional *Gut' Abend*, Eager would have passed on, had not the priest closed his Book of Hours and turned to the young man with an evident inclination for conversation.

"You have been wandering in our forest?" he asked.

"Yes! I have been up the Tannenberg."

"So? Then I wonder I did not see you. I have but just come down by the road."

"Oh, I didn't come by road. I tried to find a short cut back through the forest, and I lost my way."

"How did you find it again?"

"Fortunately I came to a house."

"So! The Försthaus, no doubt?"

“Yes! I got some beer there.”

“Hum! And was the Ritter at home?”

“The Ritter?”

“Yes! The Ritter von Geroldseck! We speak of him always as the Ritter, for short, you know.”

“But who is he?”

“Ach! I forgot you were a stranger. He is the forester!”

“Ritter von Geroldseck, the forester! His name sounds more as if he were a baron—perhaps the Herr Baron von und zu Wolfenheim!”

“Ach! You know the Herr Baron? Then Von Geroldseck is his friend.”

“Yes, but you said he was the forester.”

“So he is! The Herr Baron made him his forester and gave him that house as an excuse in order to help him, when the Geroldsecks came to an end of their property. You see, Fritz von Geroldseck and the Baron were great friends as young men together, but Von Geroldseck was poor and soon played away all his money. He married a gypsy too, out of Hungary, and his relations turned their backs on him. She died and he came back with his daughter. He met the baron, and... well? Now he is the head forester. But did you see him at the Försthaus?”

“No, he was not in. I saw his daughter.”

“The Fräulein Elsa! So? What did you think of her?”

“She is one of the prettiest girls I have ever seen, and certainly the strangest. She must have a

very lonely life up there. She really seemed quite delighted to have a visit even from a stranger like myself."

The priest took a pinch of snuff and regarded Eager thoughtfully.

"You are not going to make any stay in Kreuzdorf, I suppose, young sir?" he observed.

"That depends. I came here with the intention of doing so, . . . but . . ."

He broke off abruptly.

"Well, sir! But what?"

"Hist!" said Raymond, lifting his finger. "Don't you hear something rustling among the leaves yonder?"

"I hear nothing, but then, you see, I'm getting old and my eyes are no longer so sharp! Perhaps it is a weasel. There are plenty in the underwood."

"No! A weasel would scuttle away! This is too regular a sound—pit-pat, pit-pat, like the tread of a wolf or . . ."

"Or . . .?"

"Or a dog!" exclaimed Raymond, turning sharply round as he spoke, "And, God's truth, it is a dog—the dog, that black ungainly brute. It must have been following me! The *Teufel* . . ."

"*Meinherr!*"

"It was not an oath. *Teufel* is the brute's name!"

"From the Försthaus?"

"Yes!"

"Ach so! I have heard of it. Point it out to me. I am shortsighted!"

"There, yonder, at the base of that larch tree. Notice how curiously intelligent its eyes appear! It is... but... eh?... what the...?"

Raymond Eager rubbed his eyes.

"Well, meinherr!" said the priest. "I cannot see it."

"Nor can I," answered Raymond. "He's gone. It must have been a hallucination. I had no notion the beer was so strong or that I drank so much of it. I must be intoxicated."

"With what?"

"Beer, of course!"

"Are you so sure? Is it not worse to be drunk with the glances from a woman's eyes?"

"From what," asked Raymond laughing. "Do you take me for a youngster, to be sent wool gathering by the first pretty face I chance to see on a day's journey?"

The priest opened a certain page of his breviary and pointed to the second verse of the hymn for the office of compline.

"I read that to myself!" said he, indicating a particular passage.

"Far off let idle visions fly, and phantoms of the night?" roughly translated Eager from the Latin text. "What has that to do with the girl at the Försthaus?"

"The black hound! It disappeared when I read!" said the priest gravely. Eager came to himself immediately. If he had any pet aversion, it was superstition.

"My good sir!" he remarked, "we live in the nineteenth century, not the twelfth. Do you mean to tell me that you think that that brute of a dog . . . ? Why, it's absurd? If that was what the poor girl meant when she alluded to the gossip current in the village about the Försthaus, all I can say is that it's a scandalous shame!"

"But the dog, with the intelligent eyes?" urged the other.

"The dog! Oh! It was either my imagination or else the creature thought it was his duty to see me safely off the premises, in other words, out of the forest. It certainly was a surly brute, but I dare say I appeared a suspicious character in my English tourist get-up! A foreigner too! Dogs always dislike strangers!"

"But did you not think yourself there was something mysterious about the animal?"

"Yes! Ill-grained, morose and preternaturally sharp looking, but your cleverest dogs are often the most ill-conditioned. Besides, I was nervous, you understand, after losing my way in the forest, and then the beer,—the pretty face . . ."

"So! The pretty face!"

"Yes! I am not in orders myself, and I confess the girl's face did disturb my moral equilibrium, and the dog annoyed me. He seemed to be on the alert lest I should molest his mistress. I expect the Ritter von Geroldseck trusts to that brute to guard his daughter. It is lonely and unprotected for a girl in the forest."

The priest sighed and helped himself to another pinch of snuff.

"Ach! It is no matter," said he, "you are a man of the world, and you will go on your way back to the world. I know well that the evil spirit seems an impossible creature among railways and telegraphs and electric lights. Everything is too matter of fact there. But here—here among the mountains and in the dark forest land—it is different."

"Why do you keep harping on that string?" asked Raymond almost angrily. "Such ridiculous nonsense I never heard! Cruel nonsense too, if it sacrifices that poor girl. Why, half the young men in the village ought to be wild about her. They ought to throng round that Försthaus like bees round a hive."

"God forbid! There is not one of my young men dares to go there, except Hans, the innkeeper's son, and he is a tippler and a ne'er-do-weel."

"He, then, I suppose, is fit to associate with that young girl. I wonder a man of your cloth has not more discernment, not to speak of common manliness, than to filch away a girl's character...."

"Meinherr!" said the priest drawing himself up with dignity. "You are a stranger to our village and a foreigner to our country. You are of the Rhine steamboat, the hotel, the kursaal. You know not the things which are permitted to confound the wisdom of the world. You know not even nature, as she is—here—in loneliness, in our forest. Ach! well, it is better so. But of that girl, I do

not cast one slur upon her character. I know nothing save that she comes not to the Holy House and that the people talk strangely. But go your ways, meinherr! It is nothing to you and to-morrow you go back...."

Raymond laughed, almost bitterly.

"When I met you I was in two minds about staying at Kreuzdorf, but now I am of one mind. I shall remain, merely in order to disprove these ridiculous ideas. Besides, I am curious—about the dog, at least."

"So? Englishmen are good judges of dogs, are they not?"

"They are reputed to be."

"And of maidens?"

"Some!"

Raymond angrily aimed a blow at a bracken stalk with his walking stick, wherewith the ecclesiastic smiled benevolently.

"The hot blood of youth betrays itself!" said he. "But it is foolish for us to wrangle. I am wiser than you consider me!"

"Most people are wiser than others think them to be."

"True, meinherr! So display your own wisdom in not troubling your head about a forest girl's eyes and skin! You can bring her no good..."

"No! But I..."

"You would influence others in her favour? No, meinherr, that is beyond your power. You do not understand our people; they would not understand

you. Knight-errantry is as obsolete as superstition. I quote your own maxims. As a man of the world, you understand me? As an Englishman, you know what barter and sale mean? Well, everything outside of Christian charity is barter and sale, and for some things the price often paid is a man's own soul."

"Charity, charity!" said Raymond, "is it charity to... But it is indeed true charity, though perhaps you will not own it, to place anyone outside the pale of such a superstitious..."

The priest raised his hand.

"It is enough!" said he gravely. "To dispute is unseemly. Reflect and sleep! To-morrow you will awake a wiser man. There is plenty to interest you in the land besides pretty girls. If you rise early, I will myself guide you to the Schloss Wolfenheim. It is finer than the Tannenberg! But here is the village and yonder the hotel! *Auf Wiedersehen, mein herr!*"

With old-world courtesy the priest raised his hat, and Raymond for very politeness could not but respond.

He laughed to himself as he re-entered the inn.

"The reverend gentleman was right! Young blood is hot and—foolish! There must have been some witchcraft at work for me to get so excited and quarrelsome over a chit of a girl. And yet she was.... But.... Bosh! Let's change the subject! Ho! *Kellner!* A bottle of beer, please! Bring it outside! I will sit at this table."

Eager had not sat long, when the innkeeper, putting

a wider interpretation on his title of 'mine host', than your modern tourist-monger, sent his son Hans to entertain the foreign visitor and offer to show him the sights of Kreuzdorf. Hans, familiarly known as the Hänschen, was a middle-aged boy, with a man's failings and a lad's irresponsible ingenuousness. Both his wits and his eyes seemed diluted by over-much beer. Raymond felt an aversion from the very thought that such a creature should have shared his admiration for the girl at the Försthaus. It seemed to establish a bond of fellowship between them. That at least was his own explanation.

"Ach! so you have been there. You have seen the Fräulein Elsa!" said Hans, when the talk irresistibly drifted from the topic of Raymond's afternoon walk to the subject of the Försthaus. "Is she not a wonder-beauty? There is no girl in the village to compare with her! But the girls in the village are under the thumb of the reverend father, while she . . . Well, she never comes to church! She is not like any of the others. More beautiful, cleverer than they are, but proud. I don't see that she has any reason to be, for her father, in spite of his name, is only a forester, and her mother was a gypsy, so they say. Besides, there is not a girl in the neighbourhood who will not have a better dowry than she. If it were not for that, I might even have married her, and I don't see that she could do better. The hotel pays, and more visitors come every year, and when I am master, I shall enlarge it and make it a cure-resort for air and pine baths. It is all

very well to have a *von* or a *zu* to one's name, but the pocket is the main thing in these days. The Kaiser himself must have a pocket, and I...."

"But supposing you were as rich as Cræsus, do you think the *fräulein* would consent to marry you?" enquired Raymond, with an undertone of irony. Hans eyes blinked,

"Ach! I think she would, if I showed her my purse. It is true she is hard to please. Once I dared.... I had found courage in good wine.... I pressed her hand and would have liked to en—arm her waist, in the forest where it was dark and cool, but she cried out, and her black dog...."

"Well, what did Teufel do?"

"You know him? He crept towards me. If he had leaped or growled or barked, I should not have been afraid. I had my stick. But he only crept and crept and looked...."

Hans shuddered at the recollection, but Raymond smiled.

"It is well for the girl to have such a good guard anyhow!"

"Yes! If he were only a guard, but do you know what people say?—That the *Fräulein* Elsa has a devil?"

Eager laughed loudly and somewhat harshly.

"So she has!" said he.

"Do you also know that?" asked Hans, open mouthed.

"Yes! A black devil in the form of a dog. *Devil* is his name."

Hans joined in the laugh.

"You don't believe it, then?"

"Believe it? not I!"

"No more do I! In fact, I don't believe in the Devil at all, only . . . don't tell Father Salomo! It might injure me. Still, I don't like that dog. It is not broken to hunting!"

"Where did it come from?"

"It was a present, so they say, from the Baron. He is very fond of the fräulein and walks with her in the forest."

"The Baron walks . . . with her?"

"Yes! Therese Wirth has seen them several times, when she has been gathering faggots."

"Is she a reliable witness?"

"Yes . . . as women go, but that is not very far, is it, meinherr?—Or else it is too far."

And the middle-aged youth laughed at his own jest.

But Raymond did not even smile, and with a sudden access of unwonted haughtiness, bade Hans look to it that he was called early the next morning.

Therewith he retired to his room and began to write the letter which he had mentally composed in the forest that afternoon. But when he came to a description of his visit to the Försthaus, he stopped and sat nibbling the end of his pen.

Then omitting all reference to his adventure, he concluded the note abruptly with, "I don't think I shall stay in Kreuzdorf, as I don't imagine it is the

sort of place in which I shall be able to do any work. I shall probably plunge further into the forest in search of inspiration, though, perhaps, my best inspiration is at Swangate."

IV.

"IF a man were the central figure of the mystery, now, it might be worth while stopping to try and elucidate the matter. Here are all the raw materials for a romance, cut and dried, to my hand.—The dark forest, the castle, the baron whom the villagers fear, his friend, the forester and Ritter, that quaint old priest, the flabby faced Hans, and But no! the romance would be incomplete without Elsa. She, after all, is the most striking figure and it is round her that the web is being woven, from which the hero should come to deliver her. She is certainly a very pretty girl, and the circumstances heighten the interest she arouses. But still, wise moths avoid the flame. I must be a wise moth, not a butterfly, anyhow! Besides, how would I like it, if Tony were to meet some man in a forest and stop and dally Dear, sweet Tony! I wonder if she is disappointed that I came away here alone. But of course she must be. I almost wish I had gone to Swangate after all! Yes! The priest was right! I have no business here! I will go to see this castle they talk of, and then trust to luck and

my legs, as Jermyn would say." With which sapient conclusion, Raymond adjusted his tie, with an expression betwixt a frown and a smile, and went to the window of his room in the inn.

It was the morning after his visit to the forest house. He had enjoyed the sound sleep only sold by nature for cash payment of healthy exercise, and when he opened the casement and felt the exhilarating air of early morning on his face, and smelt the sweet, wholesome breath of the pines, he felt that merely to live and to be young were sufficient boons, without craving for other more complex pleasures. His recollection of the forest house dwindled to a mere incident in a day's journey, and he wondered how he had ever let his equanimity be ruffled or had been betrayed into displaying such heated partisanship over a slip of a girl, just as a man marvels that he should have been disturbed by a bad dream, when he awakes and sees the reassuring sunlight.

An Arcadian breakfast of coffee, rolls, fresh butter and honey, completed the sense of harmony with nature, and, having paid his modest reckoning, Raymond, knapsack on shoulder and stick in hand, marched from the village with all the ardour of a raw recruit going to his first field of glory—or death.

From his route-map he learned that there was another village, probably the counterpart of Kreuzdorf, some eighteen miles across the forest, and thither he intended to go, not certainly with any idea of staying there, but merely to have an objective point for his journey.

But he must start betimes who would outpace destiny, especially in a foreign country, and the sun was already well above the forest trees when Raymond left the village street. He was passing a garden-gate just beyond the church, when he was vigorously hailed from the door of the house, and, turning, saw the priest whom he had met on the previous evening.

"Hang the parson!" was his English pagan thought.

But Father Salomo bade him enter and wait a few moments, and impatience had to be curbed for the sake of politeness.

"Wisdom comes with morning!" said the priest, holding out his hand. "I congratulate you, meinherr! I see you are taking my advice and going further than Kreuzdorf. But, before you leave our neighbourhood, you ought to see the Schloss Wolfenheim! It is worthy of a visit, as a type of our German, feudal nobility residences. I suppose you are making for Schattendorf and the Sternbachthal?"

"Yes! That's where I mean to go. Is it a pretty place?"

"Ach! I believe you! The Sternbachthal is a wonderland! An artist who came once from England..... Herr Brand! You perhaps know him?..... said he never wished to see a place more beautiful."

"If you mean Herr Jermyn Brand, he is one of my greatest friends."

"Jermyn Brand! What is that for a name!

Jermyn? Let me see, that is English for Deutsch, but he was not a German!"

"No! It is not Ger-man but Jer-myn, with a J!" said Eager, laughing. "It is his Christian name!"

"Ach! Well, I do not know!" answered the priest gravely, "I only saw him once when I happened to visit Schattendorf. They told me he was Herr Brand, an Englishman? But, no matter for that, the beauty of the Sternbachthal remains the same. However, what I would say to you is that you can visit the Schloss Wolfenheim on the way to Schattendorf. I promised last night to guide you there, and I will show you a short track through the forest—you like forest tracks, eh? . . . which will take you straight to Schattendorf. Now, wait only one eye-blink, while I get my housekeeper to make us a basket of bread and cake, and procure a flask of Rhine wine from my cellar, We will make a famous excursion and have a *bignig*, . . . I know some English, you see! Herr Brand had a *bignig* in the Sternbachthal."

Raymond felt that his knowledge of German was scarcely equal to expostulating and being polite at the same time, so, with what grace he might, he waited for the reappearance of the priest. When the latter returned, he brought a friendly little hamper of provisions and a long-necked bottle, carefully swaddled in green leaves, which promised to afford a grateful suggestion of coolness in the heat of the day.

"Na!" said Father Salomo, making a curious

guttural click with his tongue, and the oddly assorted pair set forth in company for the castle of Wolfenheim.

Talk of various kinds, though mostly on simple subjects suited to the limitations of Eager's knowledge of German, beguiled the way, and when the priest was with difficulty delivered of an elephantine Teutonic jest or two Raymond laughed so naturally as greatly to flatter the reverend father.

After an hour's steady walking through the forest, they came to a hill climbed by a narrow tortuous path, set with flagstone steps at the steepest points.

"The Herr Baron's private way," said Father Salomo, but I have permission to use it, when he is absent."

The pine trees presently gave place to beeches and, in between the green tracery of leaves, Raymond caught sight of the grey walls of an ancient keep, partially overgrown with ivy.

The priest, with the true ecclesiastical instinct for cicerone-ship, began a monologue chronicling the history and vicissitudes of the place and the noble family to whom it belonged, but Raymond, it is to be feared, drew little distinction between his companion's pauseless recital and the drone of the wind in the tree-tops.

From the green twilight of the forest, the pedestrians passed through a low doorway into a courtyard, where they were received by an old servitor, with a grey beard and a troubled expression of countenance,

"The place seems very deserted!" observed Eager.

"Yes! this old man and his wife are the only occupants, when the Herr Baron is absent," answered Father Salomo. "And for the last year or two, even when Herr von Wolfenheim is at home, it does not make any difference. He is a very studious man!"

"Studious?"

"Yes! You will see his library presently, but why should you question it?"

"I don't know. It was only that I had formed an idea that he was rather... what shall I say?... rather dissipated."

"He is both! That is why he is remarkable. Ach! They have had parties here... of men and women... from Paris, where the Baron has spent more time than in Berlin... which have transformed the place into a Venusberg, a Brocken, a Walpurgis night. What do I know? One night in winter, Father Habingsreiter of Schattendorf... He will tell you the story, if you ask him!... .. was going home from attending the deathbed of a peasant in a lonely outlying house in the forest, and, passing close to the castle, saw all the windows lighted up as if for a great festivity, and heard strange music, though that may have been imagination. Being tired, and hoping to obtain rest and refreshment, Father Habingsreiter went to the door and knocked. Instantly all the lights disappeared and the music ceased. The castle stood lonely and silent, and only the wind

moaned in the forest. Albrecht here, opened the door, and told Father Habingsreiter that although the Baron was at home, he had no visitors and was working alone in his study in the Raubthurm. Is it not so, Albrecht?"

"Yes, your Reverence!" said the servitor curtly.

"Can we go up the Raubthurm?" asked Raymond.

"Certainly! It is from the so called Raubfenster that one has the finest view over the forest. It was from that window that the old robber-barons used to watch for the convoys going north from Italy, and give the signal to sally forth and destroy. They say that signals are sometimes given now from the window. Hans, the innkeeper's son, has seen lights appearing and disappearing, like the flashing of the sun-mirrors used for signalling in the army. But Hans drinks too much, and perhaps the flashes are in his own eyes."

As he was speaking, Father Salomo led the way to a narrow door at the base of the highest tower of the castle, which, though joined to the main fabric, had no internal communication with the rest of the building. A worn, rather dark, and tortuous staircase led to a room at the summit, lighted by an oriel window, looking to the east. The apartment was sparsely furnished, and, except for a plain hanging bookcase, the stone walls were bare.

Raymond Eager was one of those men whose first instinct on inspecting an inhabited room is to glance at the titles of the occupant's books, as the

most likely clues to his tastes if not his character. Apart from two or three Elzevir editions of the later classics, and a copy of Goethe's *Faust* bound by Vierge and illustrated with loose etchings by an artist unknown to Eager, there was nothing in the book case to appeal to Raymond's own tastes, or strike a chord of sympathy between him and the absent owner. On the evidence of the books, chemistry, or more precisely the pseudo chemistry of the Middle Ages, appeared to be the baron's favourite pursuit. Albertus Magnus, Paracelsus, Raymond Lully, and Roger Bacon were all represented, not to speak of Gebir's *Summa Perfectionis*, the oldest book on chemistry in the world.

Besides these, there were several volumes, the titles and authors of which were quite unknown to Eager. Such were a book bound in parchment called the 'Fiery Dragon', and a stout, well-thumbed folio consisting partly of uncial and partly of cursive writing, entitled 'The Master Key.'

Taking down the copy of Paracelsus, Raymond found it marked at the section dealing with the Alcahest, the fifth element or primary substance of which all others are but modifications. Possibly that was the 'Master Key' alluded to in the title of the manuscript.

In contrast to these works, the lowermost shelf of the bookcase was almost entirely occupied by French novels of the most pronounced decadent type, amid which a copy of the 'Imitation of Christ,' a 'Horæ Diurnæ' or Book of Hours, and a mystical

commentary on the Fourth Gospel seemed almost as out of place as a trio of nuns in a troupe of Bacchanals.

"It is a strange mixture of saintliness and sin!" said Raymond, smiling. "Is the Baron's character like that?"

"I cannot say what his character is like," answered Father Salomo, "but it is a commonplace moral axiom that the worst devils are the possible saints, just as the greatest saints are the possible devils."

"I wonder if..."

"If what?" asked the priest.

"Nothing much! I was thinking of the Fräulein von Geroldseck and wondering if the axiom was applicable."

"Ach! Do not speculate on that! He who speculates about a woman, becomes curious, and curiosity, in such a matter, is the stone that rolls down hill. It cannot rest till it reaches the bottom."

"But still, it is strange to think of that girl being a friend of the Baron von Wolfenheim."

"Why so?"

"Well! She appears so young, so fresh and so innocent, while he, to judge by what I hear and see, must be so world-worn and so full of bitter knowledge."

"That is the very reason, mein herr. When a man has had a satiety of sin, and knowledge and even power have become as dust and ashes on his palate, he turns to innocence as the only thing that never palls."

"But it is terrible to think of such a sacrifice as..."

"Ach! Do not trouble about these matters; they are nothing to you. But when you come to look for a wife, remember that a good woman is one third animal and two thirds angel, but a bad woman is two thirds animal and one third devil."

"Such a state of things may not be her fault. It depends which side of her nature is developed by circumstances."

So saying, Raymond went to the window and looked forth over the rolling panorama of forest and hill, spread out beneath.

Far away to the right, in what appeared to be a small clearing, he saw a thatched roof.

"Surely," said he, "that isn't the. . ."

"Yes, the Försthaus!" answered Father Salomo. "But look to the left, and you will see the hills above Schattendorf and the Sternbachthal."

Raymond glanced in the direction indicated, but his gaze insensibly reverted to the forest-house and rested there, while he tried to unravel the real bearing of the strange conjunction of circumstances, by which Ritter von Geroldseck and his beautiful daughter came to live as dependants upon so enigmatical a man as the Baron von Wolfenheim.

"Ach! Do not think of that!" said Father Salomo, tapping him on the shoulder. "It is not good for you. It is not good for anyone to look backwards. You have your day's journey before you, and to-night you will be at Schattendorf. To-morrow the beauty of the Sternbachthal will make you forget all other beauties. Eyes lose their light and skins grow wrinkled, but

the everlasting hills remain the same. Come now to see the remainder of the castle, and then we will take our *bignig* and I will show you the forest path to Schattendorf."

Raymond obeyed without demur, and they redescended to the courtyard, whence they made their way into the main building.

Here there was much more to interest the ordinary visitor, from both an archæological and artistic point of view, but not even the famous Rittersaal, or banqueting hall, with its portraits and frescoes and figures of men in armour, made so deep an impression upon Eager, as the bare, ill-furnished room, at the top of the Raubthurm, overlooking the forest.

V.

WHEN, after a friendly meal on the green plot in front of the castle, Father Salomo had bidden him God-speed, Raymond found himself actually regretting the loss of his companion, in spite of the exclamation with which he had greeted the priest's appearance early in the morning. He did not feel so fresh or so self-sufficient as when he had started from Kreuzdorf, and the luncheon on the greensward combined with the oppressive heat induced an inclination to loiter by the way, which he had some difficulty in overcoming.

He missed the priest more especially, when he came to five cross-paths with no vestige of a sign-post to indicate whither each one led. Father Salomo had shown him a path which he had described as a short cut to Schattendorf, and had even accompanied him part of the way. But, like many another guide, the ecclesiastic had left the traveller while the track was still plain and direct, without giving him any directions to help him when the road became doubtful.

In fact, Father Salomo's last words had been "Keep straight on!" about the most ironical instruction

he could have given under the circumstances.

Thus, the early afternoon found Raymond anxiously scanning the divided way before him, with not the slightest inkling as to which of the four tracks was the one for him to follow. He consulted his pocket map, but could not distinguish any such paths as those in front of him, while the trees were dense and lofty, and the sun was too nearly above his head for him to take his course by an observation, however roughly calculated.

In his perplexity, he had no resource but to try the hazard of the teetotum. Balancing his stick on a smooth stone in the centre of the cross-roads, he spun it round, resolving to take whichever path it happened to indicate, when it came to a standstill.

The expedient was a reminiscence of his schooldays, when the pivoting of a table-knife in the midst of a circle of inquiring youths, had frequently been made the oracle, answering such elementary personalities as 'who was the greatest sneak or the biggest donkey'.

Raymond smiled now at the bare recollection, and entered into the spirit of this new game of teetotum with such zest, that when the ferrule of the stick pointed to the left hand path, he resolutely took the left hand path, in spite of an instinctive feeling that it was the wrong one.

Picking up the walking staff, with which he had, all unwittingly, been playing at single-stick with Destiny, he walked in the new direction with some-

thing of the feelings of a child who says "Let's see where it leads to!"

Many a man, particularly if he be young and, certainly, if he be of Raymond Eager's temperament, finds in uncertainty a charm which is often denied to certainty.

What matter if the path did not lead to Schattendorf? It must come out somewhere, and it was at least comfortably sure that so strait and difficult a way could not lead to destruction.

In fact, the path soon dwindled to a mere wood-cutter's trail and in places was almost indistinguishable from an animal's track. The forest grew denser and closed in more thickly on either hand, so that Raymond was frequently compelled to stoop to avoid striking his head against the low-hanging branches, varying the exercise by occasionally striding over trunks which had fallen across the path.

The heat grew more and more oppressive as the afternoon wore on, and if there were any breeze stirring in the open, it was not perceptible in the stuffy confinement of the woodland. Raymond's skin felt as sticky as moist stamp-edging, and, freely as he perspired, the evaporation was so slight that it brought no relief.

"I'm dreadfully out of condition," he muttered, as he stopped for about the hundredth time to mop his forehead with his pocket handkerchief. "Phew! I wish I could reach an opening... or a stream of some sort."

The heat was indeed excessive. The very leaves

looked dry and brittle, and the grass rustled like silk as it was brushed by Raymond's feet. There had been a long spell of dry weather, amounting almost to a drought, and the air was heavy with electric force. To use Raymond's own expression, nature seemed strung on wires, and the young man shared in the general uneasiness.

But relief was at hand.

A mysterious hush fell on the forest, and the atmosphere grew dark. The tender, grass-green radiance filtering through the beech leaves turned to mellow olive, and the blue shadows of the distance deepened to violet, against which the trunks of beech and birch stood out like silver pillars, while the leaves were white against a sullen sky.

Presently the light grew so dim that Raymond had almost to grope his way from tree to tree. The silence became so intense that the sound of his own movements seemed to him as disproportionate to his size as the voice of a Gulliver to the stature of a Lilliputian.

"This is extraordinary," he muttered. "Father Salomo was right when he said I didn't know Nature as she is in this forest. She must be going to unveil her awful face, like Destiny, upon whose countenance no man can look and live. Ah! There!"

The darkness was cut in twain by a scimitar of steel-blue light, and, a moment or two afterwards, the silent air was shivered by the slow, rolling vibration of a peal of thunder. Perfect stillness followed. Then came a sound as of a thousand

sighs; a shivering little breeze struck cold on Raymond's heated skin, and in a moment the path beneath the trees became one long water-course, as the rain came pouring down through the net-like canopy overhead. The noise made by the falling drops was like the pattering of innumerable animals.

Remembering the warnings given him in his boyhood never to take shelter under a tree in a thunderstorm, Raymond hurried on anxiously, and soon rejoiced to see the forest thinning out at the foot of a rising ground, the summit of which appeared to be crowned by some sort of building.

He wondered if it were another forest house, but, on closer inspection, saw that it was a ruined chapel, a small enough place, certainly, with unglazed windows and crumbling walls. The latter, however, still supported a broken roof, offering better promise of protection from the torrential rain than the green sward.

Raymond came upon the building from the back, and had to force his way through a rank undergrowth of nettles and brambles in order to reach the entrance.

When he came to the door, what was his surprise to see a tall man in the dress of a forester standing beneath the lintel, leaning on his gun!

"May I take shelter here?" he asked.

"Yes! Certainly! One could not refuse even a dog that, in such a storm as this."

So saying, the man raised his head and made way for Raymond. Both his face and manner of speaking

struck the young man as familiar, and it at once flashed into his head that this forester must be the Baron's forester, the Ritter von Geroldseck.

"Ach! This is tropical!" said the man, as the rain simply fell down like water dropped from a height. "It is like a charge of Uhlans. These are not drops, but spears and lances. See how they pierce the ground, and see how the ground drinks up the water like a thirsty dog. Ach! There is life here! It is wonderful! Is it not?"

"It quickly wets one through!" was Raymond's practical answer.

"Ach, yes! you must be wet, mein herr! But what brings you to the Augustin-kapelle? Did you not see the storm coming on? Had you been weather-wise, you might have foretold it even this morning already. Why, the very trees were magnetic!"

"I have been to the Schloss Wolfenheim, and I am making my way to Schattendorf, but I'm afraid..."

"To Schattendorf!" exclaimed the other. "To Schattendorf! If the shadows of night in the forest make a Schattendorf, then you are indeed going there, but to Schattendorf by the Sternbachthal you are not going, or you would not be at the Augustin-kapelle. You are nearer to Kreuzdorf, by far though you are a long way from anywhere!"

"Where am I then?" asked Raymond desperately.

"I tell you, at the Augustin-kapelle."

"What's that?"

"This ruin, of course. Once it was not a ruin. Once God was worshipped here and the Mass was

said daily for the souls of the lords of Wolfenheim, the old robber chiefs, who thought to make restitution for their ill-gotten gains by founding this chantry for Augustinian friars, and to atone for their misdeeds in life, by doing good deeds by proxy after they were dead. But all that was long ago, and no Mass of that sort has been said in this chapel for two generations. In the daytime, it is a shelter place for wild foxes from the heat of the sun, and at night . . .

“Well, at night . . . ?”

“At night. Well, perhaps it is a Schattendorf, and that is why you came, eh? Answer me!”

The forester spoke so abruptly, that Raymond was quite startled.

“I . . . I am a stranger!” he stammered.

“Ach, yes! A foreigner! No German has such an accent as you have. But no matter, you are a brave boy, after all, to wander alone in my forest, and come to the Augustin-kapelle.”

“Perhaps! But where am I to go to-night, if I cannot reach Schattendorf.”

“Ach! That is the question. I will guide you part of the way to Kreuzdorf if you like.”

“I shall be very grateful. It seems to me I have no option but to return to Kreuzdorf, though I did not intend to go back.”

“Why not! It is a nice place. Some day it will be a cure resort!”

“Yes, but . . . I . . . I am only just walking through, you see!”

"So! But you should visit the Tannenberg!"

"I was there yesterday!"

"Then perhaps you are the English Herr who came to the Försthaus for a drink, and were nervous of the big, black dog."

"And you . . . you are the Ritter von Geroldseck."

"I used to be. Now I am only the forester Geroldseck."

"Noble birth does not depend upon purse or position!" answered Raymond.

The Ritter held out his hand.

"You must be of the noble class, yourself!" he said.

"Not exactly noble, but a good county family," answered Eager, with a gratified blush.

"Ach, then! I know where you can rest to-night, if you have a mind to."

"Where?"

"In my house. It is not much, but a gentleman's house is better than an inn, and my daughter will be pleased to see you again. She said indeed, that you promised to come."

"I did . . . if I had time, but . . . well, to tell you the truth, the village priest, Father Salomo advised me to go to Schattendorf and . . ."

"I see!" said Von Geroldseck, his brow clouding. "That priest is too fond of meddling. They all do it. Now, I married a wife out of Hungary, a gypsy, a daughter of nature, a child of the rustling leaves and the singing stream. I brought her home, and my mother—she asked her priest what she should

do, but he said the girl was a pagan and a witch,—my beautiful wife was a pagan and a witch. And my mother said I must choose between her and my wife. I chose, and my mother died in six months and my wife in a year. Ach! *Gott im Himmel!* It is that which has embittered me! It is that which has made me what I am! That is why I laugh when I see a storm like this, and feel glad! But pardon me! I did not mean to speak to you so wildly; only at moments like this, I remember it all, and it is a relief to tell it, even to these deaf trees and ruined walls. So, the reverend father advised you not to come to the Försthaus any more, but to go to Schattendorf. Well! I am glad you have lost your way, and I hope you will accept my hospitality for one night at least.”

“Gladly!” answered Raymond, who, in listening to the Forester’s story, had unconsciously substituted Elsa for Von Geroldseck’s wife, and Father Salomo for the priest who had called her a pagan and a witch. All his pity and all his chivalry were stirred at the idea that Elsa should be sacrificed to calumny and ignorant bigotry as her mother had been. His indignation at the thought obscured even his memory of the girl at Swangate, and quite obliterated all his resolutions of the morning.

“It must be lonely for the Fräulein Elsa in this forest!” he remarked.

“Yes! But loneliness is better than unsuitable company. I cannot bring her up in her position, and I do not wish her to associate with peasants.”

"They don't seem to wish to associate with her, to judge by what one hears."

"No! They are afraid—afraid of a girl and a dog! It is a good thing and I encourage it."

"But the dog is...."

"Ach, yes! You were nervous of it yourself, mein herr. Elsa told me. But there is no reason for fear. It is a queer creature, but it will not harm Elsa's friends,—only.... woe betide her enemies!"

"It is difficult to distinguish between them sometimes!"

"But Teufel knows! He is a wise beast!"

"The villagers and Father Salomo seem to think he is as wise as his namesake, if indeed he be not...."

Von Geroldseck broke into a guffaw of laughter.

"Ridiculous mediæval baby-talk. Man has yet much to discover, but we know at least the Devil is not a dog or a serpent, or a deformed beast of a man with horns and a hoof. The Prince of Darkness must be as wonderful in his way as the King of Day.... perhaps more wonderful, for darkness is stranger and more mysterious than light,—at least, to our human eyes!"

"The dog was given to Fräulein Elsa by the Herr Baron, was he not?" asked Raymond, who somehow did not relish his companion's disquisition on the characteristics of the lord of all evil.

"Yes! He is the last of a famous breed, just as the baron is the last of a famous line."

"The baron has never married then?"

"He has no children!" said Von Geroldseck almost fiercely.

Raymond's question had been intended as a hook to grapple the subject of Elsa's relations with the Baron von Wolfenheim, but his companion's abruptness checked him and he held his peace.

"The storm is passing over now," remarked the forester in his ordinary tones. "The birds are beginning to twitter in the branches. See how firm and green the leaves look after the rain. They were quite limp and brown this morning."

"You have a quick eye for nature!" said Raymond.

"It is a forester's business! But anyhow, I have always believed in nature. Perhaps that is why I married a child of nature."

"We ought to be good friends, then. I also have come here simply to study nature."

"Are you a scientist then?"

"No, I have no inclination for vivisection. My study of nature merely consists in receiving impressions!"

"You are an artist, then, of the new school."

"No! I do sketch a little sometimes, but I am not a painter—that is I only paint with words, on paper."

"An author?"

"That is too grand a name. Merely a scribbler, but I have come here to obtain materials for my work. The world is sick of its own artificiality, and I thought perhaps if I came to the fountain head, I

might obtain a really pure romance, idyllic and full of the sweetness of nature itself. I have already obtained more than I expected, but it is difficult to piece the fragments together."

"It is a natural ambition on the part of a young man, but I doubt if you will find much fresh material in our forest, or in any forest. It is not wild nature, but human nature that you seek, and human nature is the same everywhere. That has been said already many times, I know. It is a truism, but like most truisms, it requires experience to perceive its truth."

Raymond felt a glow of pleasure as his companion spoke. He had not expected to find such a forest-sage, having pictured the Ritter von Geroldseck as a broken-down spendthrift reaping the aftermath of a harvest of wild oats, whereas he found him a polished man of the world, having not only that indescribable air of social superiority which is the hall-mark of nobility, but also a metaphysical cast of thought, which proved that he had looked out on life with earnest eyes.

"I suppose you are right," he replied. "We only really know those things which our own experience has taught us."

"Yes! The rest is mere parrot-gabble, like the gabble of those chattering priests. Experience ought to be our one object in life, for experience is education. But come now, and you will learn by experience what like is life with us in the forest. The rain has ceased for the time, but I expect there is more to follow. Nature is seldom content with half-measures."

"And mankind is the kernel of nature!" added Raymond.

"Ach! You have read our Goethe! He had defects like the rest of men, but he was great, very great. He did not understand one thing perfectly however."

"What was that?"

"The final victory of the Evil Principle!"

"Perhaps he had not learned.... by experience!"

"No! But if he could write *now*? Faust would have a third part, eh?"

"Oh! I don't go as far as that!" said Raymond, laughing.

"You are right. These things are not to be made into jokes!"

And Von Geroldseck spoke so gravely, that Eager was awed into silence, and not without some inward misgiving as to the wisdom of having accepted the Ritter's invitation, followed his companion along a narrow path, where he had to keep both eyes and wits on the alert to save his face from being brushed by the dripping branches.

So, for the second time in little more than twenty-four hours, Raymond went to the Försthaus.

VI.

"SO! Thou hast come!" said Elsa, as Raymond and her father entered.

"Yes! I have come!" said Von Geroldseck in a tone of surprise.

"I do not mean *thee!*" replied the girl, laughing. "But the Herr Englander, whose last words were *Auf Wiedersehen*. He was loth to say it, but he did, and he has come, so I am glad."

"But why dost thou say *du* to him, a stranger?"

"Why should I not? I liked him and did not wish to regard him as a stranger. Thou thyself has taught me never to be ashamed of what I feel. When a bird is pleased, it sings. When I am pleased..."

"Thou sayest *du!*" added the father, smiling rather grimly. "Well! It is for Herr... I have not the honour of knowing the name..."

"Raymond Eager," interpolated the young man.

"For Herr Raimund—the other name is too English to say rightly—to object. If thou art pleased, Elsa, I am pleased also. But bestir thyself now, and make ready the evening bread. I will go and chop

some faggots and light a fire in the stove. The damp chills the air, and Herr Raimund's clothes are wet. He will sleep here to-night. But where is the Teufel?"

"I shut him up. He smelt Herr Raimund approaching the Försthaus and grew uneasy. The storm also made him restless and he prowled to and fro like a wolf. Did I act rightly to shut him up?"

"Certainly! The welcome of the master should not be spoiled by the churlishness of the dog, and it takes a long time to make friends with the Teufel."

"But not with his namesake, unfortunately," observed Raymond.

Elsa glanced sharply at the young man, with an apprehensive drawing together of the eyebrows, but, perceiving that the remark had no hidden application, she smiled again and began humming softly to herself, as she deftly spread the homespun cloth on the plain deal table and set out the plates and dishes for supper.

Raymond followed her movements with his eyes and was better able to examine her appearance than he had been on the occasion of his previous visit, when all detail had been eclipsed by a general impression of unusual beauty. Loveliness is always more difficult to describe than its reverse, and a man can seldom draw an accurate portrait of a beautiful woman. The very harmony of line and feature defies description except in the general terms which apply to all excellence, and any slight irregularity of

feature is ignored in the perfection of the general effect.

Elsa von Geroldseck was tall, and for a woman unusually square shouldered. Her figure was deficient according to the German standard, which demands a well-developed bosom for the perfection of female beauty. The line from neck to waist was so slightly curved as almost to give the idea of a boy masquerading in girl's attire, but an angelic boy. On this tall, almost commanding, yet subtly proportioned body, the well poised head resembled a flower on a long stalk, a narcissus for preference. The clear white complexion, dotted with one or two trout-like freckles, was framed in nearly lint-white hair, which hung in two Gretchen-plaits, below the blue morocco and silver belt confining the pleated tunic at the waist. The mouth was firm but not very full-lipped; the nose straight, and broad-bridged; and the eyes deep blue, but as tender and melting as the most lustrous brown. Indeed, it was the eyes alone which betrayed any impressionability to human feeling, the purity of the childlike but not childish face and the chaste restraint of the girl's figure, reminding Raymond of the seraphic, sexless youths, limned by monkish hands in old illuminated missals or stained-glass windows, as representative of the pure spirits who discourse the music of contemplative praise before the Everlasting Throne.

In good sooth, as Elsa busied herself about her household work and went to and fro on domestic errands, Raymond felt as if an angel were ministering to him, yet . . . he was afraid.

The darkness closed in quickly and the accuracy of Von Geroldseck's weather forecast was proved by the swish of the rain on roof and casement. The lamp was lighted, and the glow of the fire from the Nuremberg stove, when the door was opened, made strange shadows on the raftered ceiling. Outside, the trees moaned in the wind, and the dogs in the kennel bayed in concert.

Raymond was glad that he was not still wandering in the forest.

"Does thy family know that thou hast come to our forest?" asked Elsa, as they sat at meat.

"They knew I was at Kreuzdorf. I wrote from there last night, but it has just occurred to me that I said I was going on to the next village, whereas"

". . . . You have come to the Försthaus!"

"Yes, I have completely obliterated all traces of my whereabouts, as far as they are concerned. If any enquiry were made, Father Salomo would say he had left me at the Schloss Wolfenheim on my way to Schattendorf, and that is all that would be known. For the rest, I might have fallen among thieves or have been devoured by wolves. To them, I am lost."

"Most people in our forest are lost to the outer world."

"Including the Baron?" asked Raymond.

"Yes! When he is here!" said the forester.

"When do you expect him back?"

"To-morrow or to-morrow year,—who can say?"

But I don't think he will come yet. Had I thought so, I would not have asked you here."

"Why not?"

"To tell you the truth as a friend, he is a very jealous man."

Raymond glanced quickly at Elsa.

"No, no!" added the girl's father hurriedly, "not in that way, not in that way! He is jealous of himself, more than of others,—of his own dignity and his knowledge. Nothing must be preferred before him!"

"I do not aspire to . . ."

"Nay! that I know! But you are young, and he is on the borderland of age. Even without reason, he would be afraid of a younger man, for youth is power in the germ, and no man knows what it may grow to. But over forty years, the measure of a man's strength is taken, be it for good or ill."

"He seems a very strange being, your baron!"

"Yes! He considers mystery one of the secrets of influence."

"And has he such influence then?"

"Go to Kreuzdorf, go to Father Salomo, ask the villagers about him . . ."

"Oh yes! I know they are afraid of him, and speak his name with bated breath, but that is melodrama. I mean, has he any real influence, over present company for instance, over Fräulein Elsa, over yourself?"

"He is my friend, the only one, and I am in his

debt. As for Elsa, she must answer for herself!"

Raymond looked at the girl enquiringly.

"Oh, don't let us speak of it!" said she. "I told thee once, Herr Raimund, I am like the villagers, I am afraid of the Baron. He is the only man of power I have known. My father may be strong, but I rule him, do I not, my little father?"

Von Geroldseck smiled, in willing acknowledgment of his submission to his daughter's sway.

"You would rule in any assembly," remarked Raymond.

"I do not rule the Baron von Wolfenheim," said Elsa firmly.

"Does he rule you then?"

"I do not know! He tries to rule everywhere."

Elsa shivered a little as she spoke and rose from table, as if to break off the conversation.

Seeing how distasteful the subject was to her, Raymond at once began asking for information on topics suggested by the skins and heads hanging round the walls of the Försthaus.

Each one of these had its history, and Von Geroldseck was too true a hunter not to follow the trail and re-enact for his visitor's benefit the stirring scenes of the chase, which were the only break in his dull round of days.

Stag, boar, wolf and even bear broke cover in turn and had to be run to earth before either of the men thought the subject exhausted, and when pipes were finally knocked out and glasses emptied, the

hands of the carved wooden clock in the corner of the room were measuring the last hour of the twenty-four.

Therewith, Von Geroldseck conducted his guest to his sleeping room under the creaking rafters of the timber-roofed dwelling, an airy apartment in spite of its sloping ceiling but, except for bedstead, washstand and chair, as bare as a monastic cell. In fact, it was barer, for one of the first features to attract Raymond's attention was the complete absence of any of the religious emblems which he had seen in nearly every house of this most pious part of God-fearing Germany. Here there was neither crucifix, statue nor pious picture.

"Are you Lutheran?" he asked, turning to the forester.

Von Geroldseck smiled grimly.

"I follow Luther, perhaps, in that I have broken vows which I found to be against my nature, but I am not Evangelical, if that is what you mean. Did I not tell thee my mother was Catholic? I said my prayers at her knees as a boy, and the religion a man learned there is the only ideal religion to him all the days of his life."

"Are you still Catholic then, and Fräulein Elsa?"

"I did not say so. I was bred in that faith, but now I am nothing, at least not Evangelical. A Catholic may become an Atheist or a pagan, but never a Protestant for, even if he pretends to become one from motives of self-interest, he is merely a

hypocrite. As for me, I am not a hypocrite, therefore I am not Catholic. I will not profess what I do not know, and of God I know nothing. He does not dwell in our forest."

"Why, that is what your daughter said when I told her I feared nothing but God."

The forester laughed.

"When I was young, I said the same. We knights of Geroldseck regarded that as true bravery—to fear nothing but God."

"And now, do you fear. . . ."

".... Anything else?—Yes! I fear myself and the Devil!"

"Does *he* dwell in your forest then?"

"He dwells anywhere, where there are human creatures!"

"But how is there a devil and no God?"

"I do not say so. All I say is that I believe in an evil principle, because I know it. Good, I do not know—not as a personification, at least!"

"But Elsa, is she not good?"

Von Geroldseck's expression changed from a look of amused, cynical banter to one of sadness.

"Ach! yes? *She* is good! I hope so! But it is in nature's way. It is the struggle between right and wrong that produces evil. Where there is no fighting, there is no bloodshed."

"I don't understand you. Does not Fräulein Elsa know the difference between right and wrong?"

"She knows what is good in nature and what is wrong in nature."

"And have you brought her up without any religion?"

"No! She has the greatest religion—the religion of nature! Her mother was a child of nature, and I would not wish the daughter different from her mother. She has learned no artificial system of mind or of body. Our forest has been her training school and the book of nature her bible."

"But nature is not perfect," objected Raymond. "She is often cruel!"

"Cruel to one that she may be merciful to many. It is only man who is pitiless to many that he may glorify one."

"What does your friend the Baron think of this extraordinary sort of education?" asked Eager.

Von Geroldseck frowned.

"His opinion on that matter, at least, carries no weight. But, anyhow, does that concern you, meinherr?"

Again the forester assumed that rough abruptness of manner, which had so startled Eager several times previously, and the young man looked abashed. But, as before, Von Geroldseck quickly resumed his wonted urbanity, and, laying his hand on Raymond's shoulder, for he was considerably taller than the middle-sized Englishman, said, "When you know Elsa better, you will be better able to judge of the extraordinary sort of education, and you also will be educated, in our forest. Now, good-night! May you sleep well."

Despite this parting wish, Raymond's brain had

been set working too actively to be soon or easily lulled to rest.

In bygone days he had often aggravated his friend Jermyn Brand extremely by insisting upon discussing some baffling case recorded in the daily papers, and indulging in speculation as to its genesis and probable development. For instance, he had once woven a whole tragedy round the connection between an announcement in the marriage list and an intimation of the bridegroom's death, appearing in the obituary column of the same issue of the journal.

He was not singular in his love for trying to unravel mysteries, for such unravelling is the great secret of the pleasure taken by writers and readers, alike, in all stories, real or fictitious. But it was one thing to piece facts together and quite another to connect human motives and idiosyncracies. Murders and other crimes, and even high politics, are quite tangible compared with such subtleties as character and destiny.

Both the Ritter and his daughter were original enough to be unmistakable, but it was an originality which absolutely refused to be brought into line with Raymond's classification of the more or less ordinary types with which he had hitherto been acquainted.

Von Geroldseck, the reformed rake, gentleman, forester and philosopher, religious at heart and pagan in practice, at once courteous and uncouth, professing disbelief in good and knowledge of evil, yet withal

the faithful husband, good father and hospitable host!

Elsa, the angelic, godless, beautiful, boy-like maiden!

What kind of studies in contradictions were these, to set beside the respectable conventional people of Swangate, or even the shrewd, pleasure-chasing worldlings of Raymond's London experience? His father, the cultured and methodical rector of Swan-gate; his mother, the rather worldly and practical, but kindly lady-bountiful; his brother, the Cambridge don; Jermyn Brand, the dispassionate but sincere friend, artist and critic in one; even Antonia Carew, the bright and healthy-minded, if rather romantic, English girl. All these he knew and understood. They were types repeated from generation to generation and social circle to social circle.

But the figures confronting him in this remote German forest were mysteries. They baffled both his experience and his understanding, and, as intuition failed, curiosity grew rampant.

Yet, as Father Salomo had warned him, curiosity where a woman is concerned is the stone set rolling down hill.

VII.

FOR three days and three nights the rain fell unceasingly, and Raymond needed little persuasion to take advantage of the friendly shelter of the Försthaus. Walking was well nigh impossible, and he was better off there than he would have been in the dull, common room of the inn at Kreuzdorf, for of all depressing experiences commend the man against whom you have a spite to even one rainy day at a country hotel.

The morning of the fourth day broke with a watery gleam of sunlight. Roof, stone and leaf glistened as if polished, and the ground was broken by a thousand mirror-like pools and runnels reflecting the broken blue, white, and grey of the flying sky, or the silver, russet and green of the dripping forest.

When Raymond came downstairs to his breakfast, he found that the Ritter von Geroldseck had started off at an early hour on a tour of inspection through the forest to see what mischief had been wrought by the storm. Elsa was at her spinning wheel, and Teufel, who had learned to tolerate if

not to relish the Englishman's presence, lay near his mistress' feet.

She rose with a bright smile as Eager entered, and hurried to set his coffee on the table, while she told him that her father had gone out to his work.

At his first meal in the forest house, Raymond had felt as if an angel were ministering to him. Now, he had the homelier sensation that his wants were being attended to by a beautiful human girl. Yet it was all idyllic, and though impassioned, not at all passionate. Youth and maiden were mantling with the first healthy glow of the reawakening from sleep, their eyes were lustrous, their skins cool and moist, their intellects as clear as the translucent, rain-washed atmosphere. The casements were thrown back and the soft morning air flowed into the room, like a bracing sea, laden with fresh cleanly scents and all the keen sweetness of the forest land. An errant bee boomed in, and the whirr of its wings harmonised with the hum of the wheel, at which Elsa had resumed her seat, after seeing that her guest had all he wanted.

To Raymond, it seemed as if the Golden Age had returned. He was Eros and Elsa was Psyche. The Försthaus was the palace in the wonderful valley, in which the immortal lovers dwelt before the maiden learned the horrors of the dreary Lower World. Deathless youth was theirs, with impassibility and beauty, and all the heritage of the virgin earth. The very food and drink had a divine savour,

as if it were ambrosial nourishment, and nothing so gross as mere solid and liquid.

Nature blessed them and even Destiny smiled beneficently.

Indeed, Fate, however dour, must needs smile when Nature approves, and who knows but that, had Raymond always acted as much in conformity with Nature as he felt in harmony with her this morning, Destiny might never again have shrouded her brow with frowns?

At home he had been in the habit of reading newspaper or novel at breakfast. In fact, he could not take his meal in comfort without some such mental distraction. But how commonplace book and journal seemed now, compared with the bright page of real life, in the form of Elsa seated at her spinning wheel in the early sunshine, with her lint-white hair for aureole, and, for glory, the diamond tracery of light, wrought on the tiled floor by the slanting rays falling through the lozenge panes of the upper part of the casement.

Theologians speak of the lust of the eye, but here was the sheer pleasure of the sense of sight. The ear is often filled with hearing, but for the eye to be filled with seeing is a far rarer boon.

But the glowing moment slipped away, one shining drop into the ocean of possibilities, and Raymond when he rose from table, hazarded the suggestion that, as the weather had cleared, it was time for him to be thinking of resuming his interrupted journey.

Elsa's face fell, and oddly enough, the sun at that very moment was obscured by a passing cloud.

Moreover, as Raymond moved, the dog growled.

"Seest thou?" said the girl. "Even Teufel does not approve of thy going!"

"Or else, he does not approve of you asking me to stay!"

"Ach, it is not that, I am sure!"

"But I have stayed so long already!"

"Well, a little longer will make so little difference, then!"

"That is true, but remember, as I told you, I did not originally intend to return at all."

"I know, but thou couldst not but keep thy word, even against thy will! Seest thou? Thou saidst *Auf Wiedersehen!*"

"Yes, but still...."

"Still what? Why art thou in so great a hurry? Is it to return to England to see the beautiful maiden of whom thou hast told me, the maiden who was thy childish playmate?"

Raymond fidgeted and blushed.

"I am in no such hurry," he stammered, "but... but.... I ought to be!"

Elsa looked away. She had no aptitude for conventional flirtation, but instinctively wished to conceal the thoughts speaking in her eyes.

"Ach! So!" she replied at length. "I see that thou must go, that others call thee, and we, in the forest, have no right to bid thee stay. But thou canst not go to-day, at least not before my father

returns. The guest of a Von Geroldseck cannot slight his host by departing without taking leave, and thou, as I know thee, couldst not be so churlish as to wish to do so."

"Would your father be offended?"

"Certainly! And wouldst thou not feel that thou hadst given cause for offence?"

Raymond's silence answered affirmatively, and he yielded, not sorry perhaps to retire from a contest which from the first had been unequal. The first victory is the polestar of the ultimate conqueror, and Elsa, turning to the vanquished youth, said, "See! The cloud is gone over now and the sun again shines! It is a shame to remain indoors this first bright morning after the storm. Shall we go for a walk in the forest? What sayest thou? And if thou hast but one more day, thou shouldst see as much of the Tannenberg as possible. Hast thou been to the Wolfsschlucht? No? Ach, but thou shouldst see that. It is grand. It is the ravine which lies between the Schloss Wolfenheim and the hill on which the Augustin-kapelle stands. Hadst thou continued along the path instead of climbing up to the chapel, thou wouldst have come to it. Wait thou, till I shut up Teufel and put on my hat and cloak."

So saying, the girl called the hound and left the room.

Raymond stood thoughtfully by the window, wondering if it were true that Elsa had been seen walking alone in the forest with the Baron von Wolfenheim.

"I will take thee by a different path from that by which thou camest," said the girl, when she returned. "I know all the by-ways through this part of the forest, as well as my father himself. We will reach the Wolfsschlucht from the upper end, pass through the ravine to the Augustin-kapelle and so home. Perhaps we may meet my father..."

".... Or the Herr Baron?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Why, what matter if we do? I am curious to see him!"

"Did I not tell thee that I feared him? That I do not like to talk of him?"

"Yes! But why?"

"I cannot answer—not now, at least. Bear with my silence, and please me by not questioning me further!"

Again came one of the girl's strange intense glances, and Raymond felt that he would have had a heart of stone had he refused her request.

So they set forth together into the forest, a strange sequel to that setting forth from Kreuzdorf of four days previously, when Raymond had been joined by Father Salomo and confirmed in his resolution not again to visit the Försthaus.

All suspicion or apprehension vanished, out in the green sward in the clear noontide, and Raymond and his companion conversed as blithely as two children, who find a world in every raindrop shining on a leaf, and a universe in one small thicket.

'Little things please small minds,' says proverbial

foolishness, but wisdom is paradoxical and does not measure greatness by size or even by commensurate results. Else would a stock-jobbing transaction or a parliamentary election be greater than a hero's death or a mother's prayer. So birds chirped on the branches above, and man and maid chatted on the sward beneath, neither of much account to proverb-makers, but of great moment to each other and perhaps to Nature.

To Raymond, Elsa's open-hearted conversation was a perpetual source of amazement. Her ignorance on ordinary subjects was almost appalling, but on the other hand, her knowledge of unusual subjects was equally surprising. Her ignorance was purely negative, whereas most of her knowledge was a positive acquisition direct from the fountain-head. Her notions of geography, for instance, made Raymond's brain reel.

"How long does it take to cross the sea from England?" she enquired.

"Only a few hours!" said he.

"But I heard of a man from the village who went across the sea to America, and he took ten days!"

Raymond laughed.

"Ach!" she exclaimed, "how can I tell, I who have never seen the sea, though I would like well to see it? I always think that one can know nothing really, till one sees it. That is my father's idea, also! Now, I have seen our forest, and I do know that."

And therewith she displayed a knowledge of wood-

land lore, every whit as disconcerting to Raymond's ignorance, as her notions of geography were to his knowledge.

Her character seemed to combine the straightforwardness and innocence of a child with the force of character of a woman, for, on all matters on which she could speak with knowledge, she was as positive as she was yielding in other questions.

Raymond was credited among his friends with a certain gift of cheery banter, which did much to brighten any dialogue to which he was a party. But that did not serve him with Elsa, for she was so literal both in speaking and understanding, that every attempted joke on Eager's part involved a long-winded explanation. And explanation, as Jermyn Brand said, is the immediate solvent of the salt of humour.

"You told me once," observed Raymond, "that God did not dwell in your forest. Do you know anything about God?"

"Yes! Of course I have heard of it. My father has told me. It is an idea of strength with which people try to excuse their own weakness. What is thy opinion?"

"It is hard to say!" answered Raymond with the laugh of hesitation. "One is taught many things, but I should say that the best notion you could form, would be to substitute the word God, whenever your father uses the word Nature."

"Then Nature is God?"

"Partly! But I should be afraid to say anything definite, my own ideas are so vague. You see, we people out in the world, all profess belief in God, but we don't think very much on the subject. It is a settled fact, which it is needless to discuss. You and your father don't profess belief, but you seem to think about such things all the more."

"I should like to *know*," mused Elsa, "but then, of course, one never can know till one sees, and I am not likely to do that."

"Nor any one! But what did you mean once, when you spoke of the Master Key? I saw a book of that title in the Raubthurm at the Baron's Castle!"

Elsa held up her forefinger warningly.

"I asked thee not to speak of the Baron."

"But the Baron is not the Master Key!"

"No, but he has it in his possession!"

"In his possession?... Oh! You mean the book?"

"Yes! But do not speak of it more. Tell me about the English maiden."

"No, not now! I don't wish to speak of her now, any more than you wish to speak of the Herr Baron."

"Why? Dost thou fear her, as I fear the Baron?"

"Perhaps!" admitted Raymond. "But we will not talk of third parties at all. Friends ought to find plenty to say to each other without introducing other people into their conversation."

"So I think, but my father once said that in the

world, it was only lovers who could speak of themselves. The conversation of others would not be complete without picking to pieces a third."

"Oh, nonsense!" answered Raymond sincerely. "There are heaps of things to talk about, art...."

"Art! What is that?"

"What is it! Well, I suppose, at its best, it is the imitation of nature."

"Why imitate nature, when one can be natural?"

Raymond was posed by the ignorance which was illuminated by such naïve wisdom. His only answer was the somewhat unreal question. "Who is natural?"

Elsa ignored this, saying, "We are coming to the Wolfsschlucht now. We must walk carefully, for the path is steep, and the clouds are coming up again, so that it will be dark in the ravine between the high rocks. We had better walk one behind the other, but, if thou goest first, take heed that thou dost not fall into the stream at the bottom. I expect it will be swollen after the rain!"

VIII.

THE Wolfsbach, which had been but a broken thread of water when Raymond had passed the stream lower down, on his way to the Augustin-kapelle, was now a thundering torrent, nearly filling the ravine and scarcely leaving space for the narrow path between the current and the rocky wall of the gorge.

Sylvan pines and mountain ash clung like stragglers from an army to the ledges and crevices of the rocks, the dark tints of which were relieved by pink, white and yellow mosses, mingled with trailing whortleberries and tufts of fern. Along the sky line was a serried rank of larches hung with festoons of gray moss, the tasseled branches being etched with singular distinctness against the impending clouds.

Sparse drops of rain fell at intervals, and in the darkness of the narrow place, the water gleamed like a corrugated blade of steel, while the cold air from the surface was cloudy with rising spray.

No chirp of bird or drone of summer insect was to be heard; only the persistent rushing of the

water, broken now and then by the clattering of stone disturbed from its lodgment or the distant crash of falling timber.

Such noise is as monotonous and overpowering as the most deathlike silence, and Raymond and Elsa followed each other along the path almost without speaking. When they did exchange a remark, they instinctively lowered their voices, like strangers in an empty church.

The girl's white robe shone celestially in the gloom, and her tall, lithe form again suggested to Raymond the analogy of an angelic youth.

At first he thought of Virgil guiding Dante through the underworld, but then came a more appropriate recollection, that of Undine passing through the flood-swept valley on her way home with Huldebrand.

As the idea occurred to him, he looked at the flowing water with a shudder, and the true meaning came home to him of the many legends of the soulless maidens who make their dwelling in the chill loveliness of torrent and mere.

"Art thou afraid of the water?" asked Elsa.

"Afraid? No! I was only thinking of your German legends, which people such streams with strange inhabitants."

"I believe in them!" said the girl.

"Believe in them? You, who don't believe in God?"

"What has that to do with it? I know that strange creatures dwell in our forests. I see birds

in the air, men and animals on earth? Why should there not be in the water”

“Fishes?” queried Raymond irreverently.

“Nay! Nay! There are fishes, of course, I know, but they are cold-blooded creatures! I mean at least, I scarcely know what I mean. But there is all around us what we do not comprehend. Each forest tree has its individual life, and even the darkness of night But I cannot explain. I only feel, and I seem to feel other beings round me, whom I cannot see or hear. They have even seemed to give me a sense of companionship, when I have been alone. Perhaps they are the spirits of the dead. My father is not sure if the dead live again or not. He would like to be sure for the sake of my mother. I think they do live, and I am often sure my little mother is watching me. It is so strange never to have known my mother!”

Raymond, thinking of the ample kindly personage whom he called mother, wondered if those who ought to have been known but were not, were better appreciated than those who are known. He was not unfilial, but the average, practical, Anglo-Saxon son seldom weaves any halo of romance round the average, practical, Anglo-Saxon mother, until she is but a memory.

“Dost thou believe that dreams have any meaning?” asked Elsa.

“Only the meaning attaching to broken reflections of our thoughts when we are awake,” answered Raymond, thinking, he knew not why, of the lines

he had read in Father Salomo's breviary;—'Far off let idle visions fly, and phantoms of the night!'

"I dreamt strangely last night," continued the girl. "This flood and rain remind me of it."

"What was the dream?"

"I was lying on the grass in the forest with the rain pouring down upon me, and although I wished to rise, I could not. Suddenly the clouds parted and I saw my beautiful mother looking down upon me so pitifully, like the picture of Mary the mother of Christ, that hangs in the chapel at Kreuzdorf. I tried to rise and go to her, and looked to see what was keeping me down, when behold! it was a man with thy face, but with a hard expression such as thou hast not. And the rain continued falling on me, and then I cried aloud and woke. Strange, was it not?"

Raymond laughed.

"You know I would never hold down anyone who wished to rise?" said he.

"That I know right well, and that was why the dream was strange."

"Oh! You heard the rain in your sleep, and memory and imagination did the rest. If you so honour me as to see me in your dreams, I beg you next time to see me helping you to rise."

"If only thou couldst!"

Raymond felt that the aspiration was dangerous.

"See!" he exclaimed. "Here is your dream fulfilled to some extent. The water appears to be over the path just in front of us there, under those

broken trees. See how it gleams. I can hardly tell yet if it be really water. Perhaps it is wet soil."

"It is water, Herr Raimund. Here is wet soil under our feet. I have cut my boot on a rock and can feel the wet soaking through to my foot. The Wolfsbach water is always so cold!"

"Wet feet! But you will take cold, child!" exclaimed Raymond, unconsciously copying his mother's manner to her children, and speaking as if to scold, when only anxiety was meant.

"Nay? It is far from the first time! When I was younger"

"... Yes! But children can get wet feet more or less with impunity. At your age it might be dangerous."

Elsa glanced at him curiously. Masterful kindness was a novel experience, yet she was woman enough to find pleasure in submission.

"What must I do?" she asked. "I expect the storm water is coming from the hills, and the lower part of the path will be a running stream, shallow but very swift."

"Shallow water often is; but can we not return?"

"It is so far! Darkness would overtake us long before we reached home! I fear to be abroad at night in the forest."

Raymond glanced at the banks of the ravine, but they were too steep to afford any foothold.

"Then we must get through as best we can,"

said he. "But you must not suffer for bringing me out to see the Wolfsschlucht. I cannot let you perhaps die of cold. I must carry you."

"Ach! I am so heavy,—a mill stone round your neck, and we shall both be drowned."

"Nonsense! If I find you too heavy, I promise to put you down. I can carry heavier weights than you may imagine. Muscle is better than size. Now put your right arm round my neck, and let me put mine round your knees. Don't be afraid. Clasp your hands round my neck. You won't choke me. Now lift your left elbow higher, so that I can get my left arm round your waist. So! Is that all right?"

Elsa followed his instructions quite gravely, with the trust of a child in the wisdom of authority. And he bore his burden with a gravity that would have befitted a hired mourner at a magnate's funeral.

He had never had his arms round a woman before, nor could she recollect ever having been carried by a man. But, while to her the position seemed quite natural, to him it seemed unnatural.

Her pure profile was cut like a cameo against the shadow of the rocks, and the loose sleeves, falling back, revealed the rare whiteness of her arms, as they lay across the dark cloth of his jacket.

His face, bronzed by exposure to the sun, was a foil to her clear skin, just as his clustering auburn hair was to her lint-white locks.

Both were types, one of less rare and the other of

quite uncommon human comeliness. They might have posed for a picture of the troth-plighting of nature and art, or even more aptly, for the bridal of forest and stream. In fact, had any casual peasant seen them in the growing gloom of the gorge, he would probably have fled homewards with a story of how he had met a spirit of the woods carrying a Lurline in his arms,—a story which would have been explained away by the sober-minded, as originating in the spectacle of a foam-wreath caught in the branches of a fir-tree.

She was not a light weight, and Raymond's steps were much impeded by the water which swirled about his legs.

"Keep well to the left lest thou step into deep water," said Elsa.

Raymond nodded.

"Thou art tired! Thou art out of breath!" added the girl, seeing that he did not speak. "See! Here is a dry rock! Put me down for a moment at least!"

He was setting her down gently, when suddenly she clung tightly round his neck and hid her face on his shoulder. He could feel the trembling of her body, and her heart beat loudly against his own.

"What's the matter? Have I hurt you?" he enquired anxiously.

"Nay! But see yonder, on top of the cliff!"

"I see nothing!"

"Art thou sure?"

"Certain!" said Raymond, placing her on the rock. "What is it?"

Elsa shaded her eyes with her hand and peered across the turgid torrent at the trees fringing the top of the opposite bank.

"I am sure I saw a man up there," she observed.

"It is hardly likely, but, if so, it may have been your father. Shall I shout to him?"

"No! keep silent! Come further back, more in the shadow. It was not my father."

"Who then? Not the..."

"Yes! The Herr Baron!"

"Impossible! He is away!"

"But he may have returned."

"Even then, what should bring him here?"

"He has been to the Försthaus, and, not finding me there, came back this way to the castle. He will cross the stream at the lower end of the ravine, by the Augustin-kapelle. Perhaps he did not see me. We must wait here that he may have time to pass."

Raymond's feelings demanded the relief of a Saxon oath, but he could only ask in German, "Who and what is this Baron, that he should so alarm you? Is he an autocrat like the Russian Tsar?"

"Ach! I cannot... I dare not... say. Moreover, I do not know, but everyone fears him, from my father to the hound in its kennel."

"But what are you to him?"

"Nothing really... but everything, so he said once!"

Raymond frowned at the rushing stream.

"Nay! Do not thou look cross, or I shall fear

thee also. Thou art like the figure I saw in my dream, when thou frownest."

"I am not frowning at you, but at the idea that that man should have a claim on you."

"He has not, but even so, what does it matter? No one else claims me except my father."

"One might..." began Raymond moodily.

Then he turned and looked in her face. Her large blue eyes appeared almost black in their white setting. The expression in them was such as he had never seen in any eyes. He defined it as one of soul-hunger, wistful, entreating, impassioned—a haunting look of fear and affection blended.

Suddenly a tide of blood swept over neck and face to the very temples, and he knew that his own gaze must have answered the girl's.

"...One might," he continued, without appreciable interruption. "A lover might! Elsa, wouldst thou like me for a lover?"

The fateful words were uttered, almost before he had framed the question in his mind.

"There is nothing I would like better in the world," came the answer in a silvery whisper, that yet seemed to Raymond to sound above the thunderous waters like a clarion call.

"But has no one a claim before me?" he asked, as if seeking to gain time and outwit fate at the last moment.

"I told thee no. But thou... and that maiden in England?"

"No words of love ever passed between us," said

Raymond hurriedly. "Had I stayed in England, had I not met thee, perhaps I might have given her a claim. But now, I have seen thee, and no one can be the same to me again."

"How well thou speakest! That is my own feeling, but I found no words in which to tell it. Ach! Herr Raimund, hadst thou left me this morning without having spoken, I know I must have died, though I should not have known why. But thine eyes spoke, before thy mouth."

"Had I gone, could the Baron have claimed thee?"

"He? I do not know. He might!"

"He might.... and you would have allowed?"

"Should I have known, Herr Raimund,—should I have known what it was to love or be beloved?"

"Thou couldst not then have loved him!"

"Loved? No; do I not tell thee, I should not have known how to love? I might have liked him through fear. But why ask so many questions about him? We have each other now."

"I am jealous, Elsa!"

"Jealous? What does that feel like?"

"What you might feel, if you loved me, and you thought I loved the English girl."

Elsa shrugged her shoulders.

"I cannot tell what I might feel. The idea seems impossible. For thou lovest *me*, dost thou not?"

The appeal broke the crust of Raymond's doubt, and he held out his arms.

Elsa without hesitation put her own round his neck

and nestled against him as naturally as a bird going to its nest.

"Dost thou know how the Hänschen described thee to me?" he whispered. "As a wonder-beauty?"

"And dost thou think me so?"

"Thou knowest that I do!"

For answer she seized his hand and put it to her lips.

Raymond felt as if he had won the affection of a child or an angel. This love seemed too pure and spiritual to have part with human passion. His own attitude and manner were instinctively respectful and reverential, and even when he carried her across the remainder of the flooded pathway, he did not press his burden more closely to him or lean his face nearer hers.

Yet, even as in the background, the Wolfsbach was a moaning storm of unquiet waters, so behind all his love and reverence was a torrent of uncertainty and possibly unreasoning fear.

IX.

It was the hour after sunset. The clouds had been blown away, leaving a mellow sky, in which the stars were beginning to twinkle lustrously.

Raymond and Elsa walked together in the wood near the Försthaus. The Ritter von Geroldseck had not returned, and, after changing wet foot-gear and making a meal of hot coffee and bread and bilberry jam, the girl had proposed a saunter beneath the trees near the house to watch for her father's coming.

Many a fine analogy has been inspired by the perfume of flowers, but much might yet be written concerning the scents of trees. Every tree has its own characteristic odour, from the sharp aroma of the pine to the sweetness of the lime. To walk in the forest on the Tannenberg after rain was a lesson in those arboreal perfumes, which are so seldom defined because they are so much more subtle and delicate than the strong scent of flowers.

Both Raymond and Elsa were conscious of a delicious blend of fragrant odours, not overpowering or sickly sweet as the scent in a garden often is,

but bracing and antiseptic, like a westerly wind from the sea.

Two nightingales were fluting and gurgling to each other in the thicket, and every intermittent impulse of the wind set the fir-branches murmuring like the echo of ebbing waves heard in a convoluted sea-shell.

But Elsa was listening to music which was sweeter to her than the song of any nightingale and more restful than the murmur of the wind in the trees.

Language for once was understood literally, and Elsa took every word that fell from Raymond's mouth as a golden truth of a heavenly revelation. There was nothing original in what he said, but in love everything seems new, and to Elsa, who knew nothing of the impassioned love-scenes of literature and had never learned from others or by experience, to discount the language of sentiment, his every speech had the genuineness of a statement of fact.

She listened like a docile child, learning the rudiments of a new language, of which the very sound was more attractive than that of the old every-day tongue.

The word 'love' is a mere symbol till it is uttered by beloved lips: then it becomes a religion.

So when Raymond, with his imperfect German accent, said "*Ich liebe dich*," no vibration of angelic harps could have sounded a diviner message to her soul. But he was still conscious of at least one jarring note, and he could not refrain from returning to the subject.

"What made thee imagine that the Baron von Wolfenheim might ever have claimed thee?" he asked, "Hans, the innkeeper's son, told me that thou hadst been seen walking alone with the Baron in the forest!"

"That is quite possible, just as I might have been seen walking with thee. He is a frequent visitor to the Försthaus, when he is at home. My father is not always in, and he has sometimes asked me to accompany him part of the way back. But I will tell thee now why I fear him. I did not quite know before. I have seen in his eyes a look like that in thine own, but I never understood it till now. It frightened me, as if it were not right. And then, for many years past, my father has always bidden me consider the Baron. 'Do this,' he would say, 'and the Baron will be pleased!' or 'Do not do that, or the Baron will be displeased!' It seemed as if I belonged to the Baron, and I began to think that I did."

"Is that all?" asked Raymond with bent head.

Elsa peered round her through the shadows, as if to see if they were being observed or overheard.

Then she pulled up the sleeve of her dress above the elbow, and showing her bare left arm, bade Raymond look. By the fading light, he could just discern a faint red mark, like a trigonometrical symbol. As he afterwards sketched it for Jermyn Brand, it resembled



"What a ridiculous thing to tattoo thy arm like that," he exclaimed. "If thou ever wearest evening dress, thou wilt be unable to show thy arms. That is a pity, for they are very white and shapely."

"I do not understand you," said Elsa. "What is tattoo?"

"That mark is a tattoo. Who made it?"

"The Herr Baron."

"He?"

"Yes, three years ago, when I was but fifteen, I had been with my father to the castle. We were in the Baron's room in the Raubthurm. On the table was that book which thou hast seen, 'The Master Key'. 'Thou seest,' said the Baron to my father—they say *Du* to each other, like brothers!—'Thou seest, a pure young maiden like Elsa is the one essential thing which it is almost impossible to obtain. Not in all Paris or Berlin have I been able to find such another, unless I were to steal one, and bring myself thus under the grasp of the law. Besides, she must be willing.' 'Suppose she is not!' said my father. 'She must obey thee,' said the Baron. Then they both looked at me and retired to the robber-window where they whispered together, while I wondered. As they returned, I overheard the Baron conclude some remark with the words—'Then we shall have the Master Key to the power of the universe!' But my father's face looked troubled, as he bade me bare my arm. When I had done so, the Baron took a needle and some red fluid in a flask and made that mark."

"What idiotic cruelty!" observed Raymond.

"Yes! So I thought, for the needle hurt me, but my father, I knew, would allow nothing except for my welfare, so I endured the pain without speaking. We went home and three days later, when the wound had healed, there was a signal-light in the Raubfenster which can be seen from the Försthaus. My father seemed much disquieted and went out. An hour later, he returned with the Baron and that is the only occasion on which I have ever seen them angry with each other. 'She is not willing!' my father exclaimed as he entered the house. 'So,' said the Baron, turning to me, 'and art thou not willing to come with me, Elsa, to see wonderful things and learn wonderful secrets?' 'I am not willing!' I answered, copying my father. The Baron frowned and his face grew black as an oak-tree in winter. Then he looked at me again, and suddenly smiled. 'She is still yet very young!' said he, partly to himself, partly to my father. 'A day will come when she shall be willing. All women are willing some day or other, but she must yet be kept innocent.' Then my father said 'It is time!' and they both went out together. As they went, the Baron said 'She bears the mark, and that cannot be eradicated even with holy water!'"

"Holy water! Have you ever been baptized?" asked Raymond suddenly.

"Baptized! Is that another mark? But let me continue! I tried to rub the mark out till I made myself sore, but it still remains, as thou seest, al-

though it is fainter. Some days later, the Baron came again, and it was then that he gave me Teufel, telling me the dog would take care of me if ever anyone tried to molest me. It was Teufel who frightened away the Hänschen, when he sought to put his arm round me."

"But has thy father never explained what all this means?"

"No! I dare not speak of it to him. I asked him what the mark was, and he answered angrily that it was nothing. So another day, I asked the Baron, and he smiled and said it was the sign of the Master Key, which would open to me all the secrets of pleasure and power. And again, he asked me if I were willing to use the key, but, remembering my father, I said 'No,' although I felt curious to see and know what it all meant. But I was sure that pleasure could not be found by seeking, and as to power, I have never wished to be powerful, only to be happy and to be beloved."

"You have power!" said Raymond huskily.

"What power?"

"The power of beauty and the power of purity, or you would have long since given way to the Baron."

"Dost thou think so? I am glad, and now that I know what happiness is, I need never even wish for pleasure. But..."

Elsa stood still and her arms dropped to her sides, while a sad look came over her face.

"I told thee once," she continued slowly, "that

though I might have a lover, I might not be able to keep him."

"Well?"

"Now, thou knowest why. I bear a mark which I am sure is evil. It makes me feel as if I had been smirched by an evil thing. Till thou camest I was friends with the Baron. I have often walked with him and listened to him, as he told me of the wonderful things I should see and know some day, as soon as I was willing. He has been an influence over me...."

"A thoroughly bad one, I should say!" interpolated Raymond vigorously.

"Yes! A thoroughly bad one. That is why I told thee a lover might help me to be good. Without love, I know I must fall into his power. Now I have told thee all. Tell me, Herr Raimund, may I dare hope to keep my lover? Am I bad in thine eyes, or wilt thou still love me and help me to be good?"

She turned appealing eyes upon him. Her white-robed, childlike figure shone like an alabaster statue in the dusk of the woodland, and her pure face acquired new loveliness from its expression of sadness.

In her gladness, she had stirred Raymond's sense of beauty. Now, in her trouble, she stirred his sense of chivalry.

As she raised her head, he saw the reflection of a star glimmer in a tear that hung unshed upon her nether eyelid. The citadel of reserve was carried by assault, and doubt was obliterated by pity.

"*Mein liebchen!*" he said, as he turned and gathered her to him with comforting words and caresses.

As they walked back towards the Försthaus, Elsa began asking questions about England and Raymond's home.

"I will take thee there," he assured her.

"To thy home, to see thy father and mother and brothers?"

"Ye . . . s!" was his reply, but she did not notice any hesitation, and continued rapturously,

"It will be wonderful to see and know a real mother. Do sons' wives call their husbands' mothers, 'mother' in England?"

"Yes, as a rule, when they are friends. But mothers are sometimes jealous of their sons' wives."

"Ach, jealous! How often that word is on thy lips! It sounds an unkind word. Why should anyone be jealous when they are loved? But thy mother will not be jealous of me."

"I hope not!"

"No! She shall not be, for I will love her so! Fancy! To have a mother of my own, and to call her 'mother'! I have never called anyone so, except in my dreams."

With all his inward doubts as to the probable character of Elsa's reception by his family, Raymond could not but be touched at the girl's naïve happiness. So he assured her that all would be well, while at the same time he bluntly said to himself in crude, vernacular English that he was 'in for it now, and must make the best of it.'

After all, Elsa was too original in her ignorance to be classed as unlettered, too wise in her own way to be called foolish, too beautiful and too touching in her simplicity to be described as vulgar, even had she not been able to boast far nobler lineage than that of the Eager family.

But even if she were not well received, what matter? He loved her and thought her the most wonderful girl he had ever seen. They could afford to dispense with the good opinion even of his relations, and certainly of the respectable mediocrities of Swangate society. In London anyhow, she could not fail to prove a success among his art-loving friends, and he looked forward to displaying her, as a man might anticipate exhibiting some new and remarkable curio, picked up on his travels abroad.

The train of thought appears egoistical in a lover, but that a man should look forward to being proud of his wife is not an unhealthy sign. Moreover, to recall Jermyn Brand's diagnosis, Eager, for all his superficial bohemianism, had conventionality bred in the bone.

It had not appeared in the flesh, yet, however, and he sat with Elsa by the open door of the Försthaus conversing in low tones in the starlight, and drinking deep of the old holy well of love's romance. They were discussing how best Raymond was to broach the all-important subject to the father, when Elsa suddenly remarked upon the lateness of the hour.

Raymond looked at his watch and found that it was ten o'clock.

"It is strange my father does not come!" said she. "He is seldom as late as this."

"I hope no harm has come to him, that he has not been cut off by the floods."

"He is too weather-wise for that. But I wonder if that man whom I saw in the Wolfsschlucht..."

Elsa stopped abruptly and held up one finger.

At the same moment the dogs in the kennels began to bark.

"It is he!" she said, as a figure emerged from the darkness of the forest into the clearing round the house.

"Thou art late! What has kept thee, father?" she asked, as the forester came to the door.

Von Geroldseck without replying, turned to Raymond, saying, "Still here?"

"Yes! I was going this morning, but Fräulein Elsa told me you would consider me churlish, if I went without taking leave—and you were gone, before I came downstairs."

"I am sorry, but you must go at once. I will guide you to Kreuzdorf."

"Father! At this hour? Thou wert not wont to be so inhospitable! What has happened to change thee?" exclaimed Elsa.

"I am not inhospitable, but I also am only the servant of a master. The Herr Baron has returned!"

X.

"BEFORE I go, I wish to speak to you!" said Raymond to the forester.

Von Geroldseck looked troubled and glanced from Eager to Elsa, who was lighting the lamp in the sitting-room of the Försthaus.

"I have enjoyed your hospitality...." continued the young man.

"Ach! That is nothing!" said the forester quickly. "I am not an innkeeper."

"I know that, but I mean I have taken advantage of your hospitality. I have accepted bed and board, and instead of paying, I have requited you by stealing."

"Stealing?"

Raymond tried to laugh, thinking that the awkwardness of his position might best be carried off by the humorous manner, which he had so often found the best antidote to embarrassment. But the gravity of his host's demeanour froze the smile on his lips.

"What have you stolen?" asked Von Geroldseck. Elsa came forward.

"He has stolen nothing," said she. "I do not know why he should use that word. He has but accepted the love which I have given him, and has paid me with his own."

"Is that indeed so?"

"Yes! I wish to tell you, Meinherr, that I want to make Elsa my wife."

"Elsa.... wife.... you.... Englishman!" gasped the father. "But no! It is not possible! Why, it is but a week...."

"Thou saidst it was but one day in my mother's case!" remarked Elsa. "When Nature speaks, she speaks at once, without hesitation."

Von Geroldseck looked from one to the other.

"But this is not natural," said he. "An Englishman, cold-blooded, phlegmatic, prudent and with an eye to business, to meet a girl in a forest, stay in the same house with her for four days, and then to love her and wish to marry her!—It is wonderful, it is magnificent, but it is not nature!"

Raymond was secretly inclined to assent, but the mere fact that the father raised difficulties sharpened his zest for combat, and enhanced the value of the victor's guerdon.

"But it is nature," he exclaimed. "Here, away from the artificial life of cities, in your forest, alone with nature, one learns to act according to nature. You yourself said I would be educated in your forest, and I have been!"

The forester shook his head, growing calm as the young man grew vehement.

"I am sorry, but it is impossible! Your family . . ."

"My family has nothing to do with it. I am of age. I have some—a little money of my own, enough to keep Elsa and therefore to be happy with her."

"It is easy to talk like that, Herr Raimund, but it is an ungrateful task to oppose one's family. I have learned that, as I told you, by experience. If you wish to be true to nature, you must live according to nature. Here, in our forest, one can do so, but in towns, in England for example, it is impossible! This life is new to you, Elsa is new, but when it became old to you, you would tire of it and perhaps of her."

"*Never!*"

"You say so, being blinded to everything but your present desire. But it is only custom that renders monotony tolerable. Elsa would go with you to England. Everything would all be new, and would please her, but, as you in the forest, so she in the city, would tire and wish to return to the old life."

"I would live wherever Elsa wished!" said Raymond.

"And I," added the girl, "have no wish except to live where thou dost! I will follow thee through the world."

"Thy old father!" said Von Geroldseck.

Elsa hung her head, and threw her arms round his neck.

"I had not thought of thee, little father. Why is it that this stranger, for he is a stranger, though

now the oldest and dearest of friends,—why is it that my love for him made me forget my love for thee?”

“When the young birds fly away and begin to build their own nest, they do not think of the old home or the old birds who taught them both to fly and to build!”

Elsa looked up, and smiled archly.

“Then, father, after all, it is but nature, this feeling of mine and his?”

Von Geroldseck smiled in response, but sadly.

“Thou has wit, my Elsa!” said he. “But what is nature here and now may change elsewhere and hereafter! Look you, Herr Raimund, thou art a man of the world”

“Thou sayest *thou* to *him*? Good father!” exclaimed the girl.

“I follow in thy footsteps, Elsa. But, seest thou, Herr Raimund, thou knowest that things in the world are not as here, and that Elsa, though she be a Von Geroldseck, has no dowry and is unlettered, as the world judges knowledge. How can I let her go forth to a foreign land to be perhaps despised as a peasant, a mere forest girl? And thou thyself hast duties to thine own kindred and the world in which thou livest!”

“Let that be my responsibility!” said he boldly. “As for Elsa, if you will but approve and she will trust herself to me, she shall never be despised or I myself shall be despised.”

“Perhaps thou mayst be, and that will cut deepest of all!”

"Not so long as Elsa does not despise me!"

"And that is impossible!" said the girl.

Thus the unequal contest continued, impassioned heedless youth on one side, prudent but fond age on the other. The result would have been a foregone conclusion, but for the one influence that seemed to brood like a shadow over Raymond and Elsa.

Von Geroldseck pleaded that Raymond should at least go away for a few months, and if he still thought well of it, return and renew his suit.

"What! Leave her here in this forest, exposed to all the evil influence of that evil man?" he burst out.

"Which evil man?" enquired the forester coldly.

"Oh! father, thou knowest!" said Elsa. "Thou thyself didst save me from him once, when thou saidst that I was not willing. I have told the truth of that to Herr Raimund and I have shown him the mark."

"Am I not sufficient to protect thee again as I did before?"

"Yes, but thou art not always here, and he gains power over me. I fear him and I wish to be away from his neighbourhood. For that alone, I shall be glad to leave the forest, and cross the sea. He cannot follow me there."

"Money can follow anyone!" said the father bitterly. "While thou art here, he is content to know thou art here, but if thou leavest this place..."

"Do you mean to say he will persecute her even

then,—when she is my wife?" asked Raymond harshly.

"Nay! I do not say so. But in this matter there are many considerations to be weighed."

"And you mean to say he is one? What is the man at all? I know he is a Baron, but in England a German title does not count for much! But is he Elsa's guardian, or are you his bond-slave?"

Von Geroldseck's face quivered, whether from anger or some other emotion, it were hard to say.

"My noble knight!" murmured Elsa, looking on Raymond's upright attitude and flashing eye.

"Why, you yourself," continued Raymond, "said you wished to save Elsa from the struggle, and safeguard her from harm. Which then is the better means, for her to become my wife and go away from here, or for her to remain exposed to the evil machinations of that mystery-mongering charlatan? Here is the struggle between right and wrong that you spoke of! Let there then be no bloodshed especially of the innocent! Are you so weak that you cannot decide without deferring to that breeder of dogs and devils?"

The forester looked quite cowed, much to Raymond's surprise for, though he could not and would not repress his indignation, he was not without fear lest his vehemence should provoke the father and lead to an irrevocable breach between them.

"I cannot consent to Elsa leaving me, with my knowledge and consent," said he. "What she may

do in my absence, without my consent or my knowledge, I cannot be held responsible for."

"But thou dost not forbid?" said the girl.

"I neither consent nor forbid. I know nothing of thy intentions, so I cannot oppose that of which I know nothing. That thou mayst be happy is all my wish."

A moral coward, thought Raymond to himself with youthful rashness of judgment.

But Von Geroldseck turned upon the young man, saying, "Remember this! If any harm whatsoever come to Elsa through thy means, thou wilt have to reckon with myself, as well as with others. Thou sayest to thyself that I am weak, but wait! Some day, perhaps, thou wilt find it as difficult as I do to make a definite decision. Remember the old Greek idea of tragedy,—the conflict of two principles, each equally true but quite irreconcilable. Now, it is time to go. I will get my lantern and guide thee to the path to Kreuzdorf."

"Father!" exclaimed Elsa. "So late! The time is near midnight!"

"We must go!" said the forester.

"But just this one night, and after all that has passed! Ach! It is terrible to part so suddenly in such uncertainty."

"Little daughter! On this point at least I am decided. Herr Raimund must leave the Försthaus to-night."

Elsa turned helplessly to Raymond, and the father went out into the yard to fetch his lantern.

The young man seized the opportunity to whisper, "I will meet thee to-morrow morning on the path to the Tannenberg."

She nodded, but rather absently and, as her father returned, remarked, "The Von Geroldsecks were not wont to be so inhospitable!"

"In their own home, no!" answered the forester. "But this forest house is not my house, though I dwell here."

"Whose then!"

"The Baron von Wolfenheim's!"

XI.

HAVING obtained admittance to the inn with considerable difficulty at that late hour, Raymond bade Hans, who opened the door to him, call him as early as possible the following morning, and make sure that he woke him.

Once in his room, he threw himself upon the bed and lighting a cigarette, began to think out his plans. He felt that, morally speaking, he had burned his ships, and that no retreat was now possible. Even had it been feasible, he would have scorned to withdraw, and all that remained was to decide upon his plan of action. This was not so easy, however, and, fatigued as he was by his day's excursion with Elsa to the Wolfsschlucht and the emotion of the scenes that followed, he slipped into slumber without being aware of it.

In his dreams he heard again the roar of the Wolfsbach growing ever louder and more persistent, and woke with the morning sun in his eyes to find Hans hammering at his bedroom door.

He rose at once and dressing speedily, went downstairs. Nobody in Kreuzdorf could afford to

be a laggard on a fine morning, and as Raymond drank the cup of coffee which Hans had prepared for him on a table in front of the hotel, the thin columns of smoke rising from every roof-top proclaimed that the workaday world was astir.

Some half a dozen men and thirty women, the latter with shawls over their heads, passed down the village street on their way to attend the six o'clock Mass at the chapel, the tinkling bell of which sounded rather harmonious in the fresh morning stillness.

The summons to prayer gave Raymond an idea. Drinking off his coffee, he followed the chapel-goers, and entered as the priest was reading the gospel in a sonorous voice, pronouncing the Latin words in the emphatic German way, with hard c's and t's and g's.

The day was September 21st, the festival of St. Matthew the Apostle.

Raymond Eager heard the words, "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

The text remained in his mind during the whole of the brief service, and he wondered how often it was practised by those by whom it was preached. When the Mass was over and the majority of the congregation had departed, he went to the sacristy door and asked for Father Salomo.

"Ach! It is you, Meinherr!" said the priest. "I

did not expect to see you again after our *bignig* at the Schloss Wolfenheim. But I suppose you are on your way back to England. Wait now only an eye blink, till I have said my prayer of thanksgiving after Mass, and then honour me by coming in to breakfast. I have some very fine honey, Father Habingsreiter has sent me from Schattendorf. And did you see Father Habingsreiter?—But, no, you shall tell me all that afterwards, and beguile my breakfast with the tale of your wanderings. Wait now, a moment, and I will be with you!”

The moment proved a record ten minutes, but at length the priest reappeared and the two went together into the presbytery, where Father Salomo stole a few more minutes to spur his housekeeper to do credit to his hospitality.

“Well, now!” said the priest, as they took their seats at table. “Was not the Sternbachthal wonderful?”

“I have not been there!”

“So? Ach, it was on account of the rain, I suppose. The stream must be very swollen. But Schattendorf—tell me, did you like that as well as Kreuzdorf?”

“I did not visit Schattendorf!”

“But whither did you go then after I left you? Were you tired of our primitive villages and regret your own class of people and manner of life?—In that case, I suppose you went through the Niederwald to Bad Fichtelstein!”

"I did not quit your forest!"

"Surely you did not stay at Schloss Wolfenheim?"

"No! I lost my way, was overtaken by the storm, and took refuge in the Augustin-kapelle. There I met the Ritter von Geroldseck...."

"...And you returned with him to...?"

"Yes! To the Försthaus!"

"Then was it you, Meinherr, who were walking with Von Geroldseck's daughter alone in the forest near the Wolfsschlucht, yesterday afternoon?"

"Certainly! How did you know? The forest seems to produce a rich growth of eavesdroppers!"

"Ach! In our forest, every branch has an ear and every leaf an eye! It is as well, at least, to act on that assumption. Therese Wirth saw Fräulein Elsa walking with a man, and told my housekeeper. She thought it was the Herr Baron—they say he has returned unexpectedly—but it must have been yourself."

"The Baron has returned, though!"

"So? And is that why...."

"Yes! That is why I left the Försthaus and returned to Kreuzdorf!"

"H'm! He does not like strangers at the Försthaus, more especially if they usurp his privilege of walking alone with Fräulein Elsa in the forest."

"It is a scandal!" burst out Raymond.

The priest raised his hand soothingly.

"There I agree with you," said he. "I told you so myself, only you would not believe me. You

are wiser now! However, it is as well the Baron has returned, if only that you thereby escape further risk of having your own name involved in the scandal. I warned you not to interfere!"

"I know you did, but as destiny ruled that I should return to the Försthaus, so it also decreed that I should interfere—to some purpose."

"How?" asked Father Salomo, pausing in the act of lifting his coffee cup to his lips.

"I mean to make Elsa von Geroldseck my wife!"

"Thunder weather! The stone has rolled down hill faster than I thought!"

"Yes! It is settled now, and I come to you to assist me!"

"To get out of the entanglement?"

"Certainly not! To save Elsa?"

"I? My good friend, what can I do?"

"You must marry us!"

"But has her father consented? Come, tell me the whole story!"

Father Salomo spoke as sympathetically as if Raymond were a penitent at confession. The young man, though not without an inward sense of the whimsicality of finding himself, the son of a Church of England clergyman, confiding in a Roman Catholic priest, could not deny himself the relief of expressing his feelings to an attentive and kindly disposed auditor. So he described his experiences, dwelling especially upon his anxiety to save Elsa from the apparent peril of her surroundings.

"And so you really wish—to make her your lawful wife?"

"Certainly! What do you take me for?"

The priest held out his hand.

"Forgive me for ever having doubted you," said he. "But, you see, I did not know you. It was the circumstances more than the people that I doubted. I have heard such things! They talk so in the village!"

"Of the Baron, I know; but what has anyone against Elsa?"

"They say she is a witch, and I also thought she would prove a temptress. I feared for you, a young warm-blooded man, in proximity to such a peril. I thought the Baron.... but I see it is not true!"

"What of the Baron?"

"I thought he had made, or wished to make Elsa his light o' love!"

"Yes! That is the terrible danger!" exclaimed Raymond. "And she is so innocent, she does not, or did not, perceive it. All she knows is that she fears him, and her instinct warns her that he means evil. That is why I want to take her away at once, why I must do so. Will you not help me, sir? Surely it is the privilege of your office to help to avert evil."

Father Salomo appeared moved.

"I pity the Fräulein Elsa," said he, "but, mein-herr, I also pity you. You mean well, but... but... I cannot foresee a good ending. If you come to

me for counsel and help, I must consider your interests as well as hers. Indeed, if you marry, they will be identical, and what will be bad for you will be bad for her."

"I know what you mean. You mean my family, the fact of my being a foreigner, the difference of our surroundings, her strange upbringing, and all that. But even if those do create difficulties, surely that small evil is better than the . . ."

He shuddered.

"Do not let jealousy master worldly prudence!" said Father Salomo. "It is good to be solicitous for innocence, but do not let personal feelings induce rashness. At present, it maddens you to think that what you desire for yourself honourably could ever become the property of another dishonourably."

Raymond was silent. The priest had probed him to the quick.

"If she were an ill-favoured or common girl, you would not be so anxious to save her. Try, then, to be impartial. I do not see that you have any *duty* in the matter, except to yourself and your own people!"

"But I have—I have! I love her, and love once given becomes a duty."

Father Salomo smiled tolerantly.

"It is not wise to look at life in the object glass of love. It is distorted! But supposing you do marry her, what are your plans? You cannot be married here!"

"Yes! I will bring her quietly to the chapel, and you can marry us."

"But you are a Protestant and a foreigner!"

"What matter? We shall at least be married, and afterwards we can go where there is a British Consul for the legal contract."

"But it cannot take place in this village. The people...."

"Hang the people! Have the chapel door locked!"

"Even so, nothing can be done in Kreuzdorf that is not known to the whole of Kreuzdorf! Besides, do you wish the news to reach the Baron von Wolfenheim?"

"What do I care, once it is done?"

"You may ask that when you are far away from here, in a city or beyond the sea. But here, the Baron is our over-lord. He is all powerful, and from him there is no appeal. He would accuse you of abducting a German maiden, and, from what you say the Ritter would not take your part. No! what you propose is a foolish boy's freak!"

"Be that as it may, at whatever risk, I mean to take Elsa away. But stop! Why not meet us and marry us in the forest? Yes! At that old chapel, for example—the Augustin-kapelle! We should not be disturbed there, and no one need know that you were concerned in the matter. Nothing would be known except that Elsa was gone. Few would even suspect that I had anything to do with her disappearance. That I should go at the same time will seem a mere coincidence. My

movements are of no more importance than those of any other passing foreign tourist."

"But they know at the inn that you have been to the Försthaus!"

"Even so, in any case, we shall be gone and be beyond reach of pursuit, off the territory of your over-lord—over-devil would be more appropriate! But we cannot travel alone together like that, without being married. I love her too well for that. And I shall not pause in our flight, till we are well over the frontier of Germany!"

"Ach! It is simple madness!"

"But madness is better than sin! You cannot wish me to place Elsa even for a day in the false position of...."

"God forbid, my friend! But be prudent. Go home! Go back to England! Consult! Take counsel! Wait at least a few months! Act regularly!"

"How can I wait when honour is at stake? As for the rest, I am only accountable to myself for my own actions. If my friends don't like it, let them do otherwise! My mind is made up. It rests with you to sanction my union. You must do it! After that, and even if we are stopped, not the Baron himself can part us!"

"He could! There would be no witnesses, and I could not speak. Your word and Elsa's would count for nothing."

"Perhaps not, but I mean we would feel bound to each other, and know we were husband and wife!"

"You are very headstrong, meinherr! But it would be unlawful for me to act like that."

"The law! Are you afraid of the *Kulturkampf*?"

"I refer to ecclesiastical law. How can I marry you, a Protestant, and her, a Pagan, who, as far as I know, has not even been baptized?"

"Do you remember the gospel of the day?" asked Raymond.

"What has that to do with it?"

"They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice!' Do you act upon that, Father Salomo, if, because we are not of your church, you would rather see us run the risk of scandal, if not of sin, than perform a simple ceremony, which it is for us to carry out? Is that Christian charity? Is that calculated to impress us favourably? Who knows indeed, but that if you set an example of true charity and toleration, we may not come in time to profess the faith of which you are a minister? Men judge of religion, like everything else, by practice, not precept!"

The wily special pleading evidently impressed the priest.

Raymond followed it up by the appeal personal.

"That deed must be good which leads to good results," said he. "Only do what I ask, and you will save an innocent girl from a great peril, remedy injustice, make two fellow human creatures happy, and draw down a blessing on yourself,

Religion's only aim surely must be to avert evil and do good. Religion cannot preach unkindness and hard and fast rules. Nothing is hard and fast in this world. Everything must depend upon circumstances! I don't ask much. Practically it is only that you will witness the troth-plighting of Elsa and myself. And as soon as we reach a town, we will go before a British Consul."

"But how will you get away from the Augustin-kapelle?"

"I will hire a carriage!"

"Not in Kreuzdorf nor in Schattendorf!"

"No? Then I will walk over to Bad Fichtelstein and hire a carriage for the day. People here will think I have left. It is still early! I am to meet Elsa at noon. I will tell her to be ready. Then I will go straight on to Bad Fichtelstein, and to-morrow, I will come with a carriage to the Augustin-kapelle!"

"Not in the daytime!"

"No, perhaps it would be wiser not to. Moreover, the place seems to have an evil reputation after dark, which is all the better for us. The trees will have neither ears nor eyes. It is nearly full moon to-morrow evening. I will be there at sunset, leave my carriage hidden on the path near the Wolfsschlucht, and we will all meet at the chapel."

So saying, Raymond escaped the risk of further argument by leaving the house.

"It is madness, but madness must be humoured!" muttered Father Salomo doubtfully.

XII.

ON the morrow morn, when Raymond Eager was away at Bad Fichtelstein, and Elsa, restless with suppressed excitement, was feverishly energetic about many things, but about nothing long, there came an unwonted visitor to the Försthaus.

Teufel was chained to his kennel, or the animal might not have restricted itself to such inactive hostility as it had displayed on the occasion of Raymond Eager's first visit to the house. Whether it were merely the spectacle of clerical coat-tails flapping in the wind that irritated the creature, or an instinct that the new-comer was even more of an alien than the young Englishman had been, Teufel's fury knew no bounds. He tugged at his chain, bounded from side to side, slavered at the jaws, growled, uttered deep, bell-like barks, and finally howled with sheer rage at his own impotence.

"Go thou, Elsa, and see what ails the dog!" said Von Geroldseck. "He could not make more riot, if the Devil himself were at the door!"

"It is not the devil, but the priest!" answered the girl, peering out of the door.

Ach! So? Then he must be exorcised! The Devil is the enemy of mankind, but the priest—any priest is my own particular enemy. What does he come for, I wonder, but to do me harm?"

The forester rose and went to meet the visitor on the threshold.

"Peace be to thee and all who dwell in this house!" said Father Salomo.

Von Geroldseck grunted an inaudible reply, and inclined his tall form in a bow which was more ironical than deferential.

"I have come on a mission of duty!" continued the priest.

"Is not a priest's every action a matter of duty?" asked the forester.

"It ought to be, and should be considered so. However, I did not come to indulge in word-fencing, though I have come on an affair of honour."

"Duty!" said Von Geroldseck, correcting.

"They are usually the same!"

"By no means! Duty is a name to justify slandering our neighbour. Honour is an act to justify oneself! The priest who called my wife a pagan and a witch, acted from a sense of what he called duty. I married my wife from a sense of what I call honour. Do you see?"

"Even your wife would have recognised that I act from a sense of both honour and duty in the present instance..."

"What right have you to name my wife? Mention her again and I will slip the chain from the

neck of the dog yonder. The Teufel and the priest are supposed to be natural enemies, and we would see who would come off best. Such a spectacle would be instructive."

"Perhaps, but I do not come to instruct but to learn...."

"What?...I cannot teach much, except how to attend to one's own business and abstain from..."

"From interfering, you would say. Well! Perhaps it is interfering, but it is none of my seeking.—You have had an Englishman staying in the Försthaus...?"

"What is that to anyone, but myself?"

"A great deal to.... your daughter!"

"Do you mean to insult? Remember, she is a Von Geroldseck, though only a forester's daughter!"

"Yes! It is because she is what she is that I have come to you to-day. Had she been otherwise, I might not have considered it necessary. Forget that I am a priest, if it is my profession which annoys you! I come simply as one man might come to another to warn him of a danger. Come a step further away from the house, that she may not overhear!"

Von Geroldseck obeyed.

"What is the danger?" he asked.

"The Englishman wishes to take your daughter away! Of course, you may say it is not my affair, nor is it; but, to do the young man credit, he wishes me to marry him to her, before he goes, in secret, you understand. I do not know Fraulein Elsa's age, but, even if I can lawfully unite her in

matrimony to a foreigner and a heretic, I could not do so without knowing that you had sanctioned the union, as her parent and guardian."

The forester laughed harshly.

"And do you think my daughter would act against my wishes?" he asked.

"That I have no means of judging. Of course, I know there are reasons why you should think it best—why anyone would think it best—for the Fräulein Elsa to be united honourably to an open-living man..."

"Open-living?"

"Yes! That is what I say! Men who live otherwise generally have evil to conceal. Mystery is a cloak of disguise..."

"To whom do you refer?"

"We need not mention any names. I merely repeat, I can understand why you should desire your daughter to be able to leave your home and the forest with honour. Looking at things as they are, it is better that she should go away..."

"Then she shall not!" muttered the other.

"No, as a father, I do not see how you could say otherwise. It certainly would not be a seemly thing for your daughter to leave home surreptitiously, and slip away by stealth with a foreigner, whom she has scarcely known for ten days. Yet, do not misunderstand me. I would say nothing against him. He is a good youngster, and he means to act kindly and honourably. But he does not know himself, and is carried away by an impulse of

natural passion. You must be solicitous for your daughter, but you must also have consideration for him, and not take advantage of a foolish generous impulse."

"I know right well what I must do and what I must not do!"

"Of course you do, but, as he consulted me, I think it is but right that I should try to represent the matter impartially. I can do so all the better, just because, as you reminded me, the matter does not concern me. He has given me a better idea of Fräulein Elsa and of yourself too, than I ever had before; but he has also convinced me more than I was convinced before, of the dangers to which she is exposed. It is for you as her father to guard against them."

"Did Herr Raimund ask you to come and tell me this?"

"On the contrary, he wished me to say nothing. All he asked was that I should perform the marriage ceremony. But, Herr von Geroldseck, you know what madness a hot-headed boy will be driven into, without looking at ultimate results. Your own experience . . ."

The forester glared at the priest.

"I know, I know," said the latter hastily, "you were guided by honour in your own case, but, you must admit, it did not turn out well either for yourself or your gracious wife, now gone to eternity. I appeal to you now, not to let this Englishman fall into the same error, and bring trouble on him-

self or the Fräulein Elsa. At the same time, I should like to see the Fräulein protected...."

Von Geroldseck held up his hand to impose silence.

"It is enough!" he said. "If you have been sent by the Englishman to get him out of a difficult position, it is useless to speak, for when he did not take advantage of the advice I gave him to go back to his people and think no more of Elsa, he shall not escape fulfilment of the promise he gave my daughter by sending you to plead for him."

"But he has not sent me. I told you so."

"Then still less is your excuse for coming to tender advice. You bid me remember my own case, and save him from the same folly. Why should I give others the benefit of my experience?"

"Duty!" murmured Father Salomo.

"Then I will do my duty, and give him and Elsa the benefit of my experience. You priests say when Rome speaks, one needs must obey! I say, when Nature speaks, one must obey! I shall not interfere. Elsa shall do what she chooses. Herr Raimund shall make her his wife, if he will. I do not believe that matrimony is more binding than love, for love is nature, and nature in herself is all pure; but out in the world, where they will go, people do not live by nature, and nothing is binding that is not sanctioned by ceremony. Therefore, she must become his wife that no one may ever cast a stone at her. That is why I married my own wife. Why did not that turn out

well, you ask? I will tell you. It was because a priest interfered, and by his master, the Devil, I will not let a priest interfere again to spoil my daughter's happiness, as her mother's was spoiled."

"But it is chiefly in her interests, that I counsel at least a little delay."

Von Geroldseck drew himself up to his full height.

"Did you counsel haste, I would insist on delay, but as you advise delay, I will have all speed."

But the unseemliness.... the scandal!"

"It rests with you to prevent scandal!"

"But do you authorise your daughter's marriage?"

"I authorise nothing! I am not a man in authority. I am a salaried servant! I am like a soldier, I obey orders."

"But not in this case! No superior can come between father and daughter."

"Nor can I come between my daughter and the man she has chosen. Now go!"

And Von Geroldseck pointed to the forest path so imperiously, that Father Salomo did not care to contest the matter.

"Weak where he should be strong, and strong where he should yield. Unwilling to cause pain to his daughter; distrustful of the Englishman, yet seeing in him a life-buoy for the honour and happiness of the girl; disposed to let things drift, yet determined to be consistent in wrong-headedness; spiritually fanatical, yet irreligious; wishing to save Fräulein Elsa, yet mortally afraid of acting on his own responsibility in defiance of the Herr Baron;

a keen intellect, a sound but embittered heart, and a cracked brain!"

Such was the priest's mental catalogue of Von Geroldseck's qualities and defects, as he walked back to Kreuzdorf.

Meanwhile the forester returned to the house and, calling Elsa to him, kissed her on the forehead, as he said; "That priest has counselled me to order thee to have nothing further to do with Herr Raimund. But, simply because he has given me that advice, I tell thee that thou need'st not fear that I will come between thee and thy happiness. If thou darest to steer the ship of thy life by the compass of thy heart, go forth boldly. I am but the old pilot which has brought the fair ship to the open sea. The pilot remains in harbour, but the ship sails afar with the prospering breeze. Only remember that, if bad weather comes, the harbour is still here."

He pressed her to his breast, and then left the Försthaus hastily, as if afraid of changing his mind.

XIII.

THOSE longest of mortal hours—the hours of expectation were ended. As the sun's lower limb was obscured by the ridge of the Tannenberg, Elsa flitted like a white doe through the shades of the forest to the old chapel where her father had first fallen in with Raymond Eager.

There, she stood between the ruined walls, her feet amid brambles and nettles, her eyes gravely fixed on the face of Father Salomo, who stood with his back to the broken altar.

There, she dowered a man with the priceless dowry of her youth, her health, her beauty and her innocence, in return for the title-deeds of 'love on a mortal lease'.

When Eager long afterwards described the scene to Jermyn Brand, that master of symbolic art said he could not wish for a better subject for a picture than the allegory presented by this scene of the maiden standing amid the ruins at twilight, with the brambles about her feet and the earliest stars beginning to shine through the broken roof above her head, the World beside her and the Church in front. "So,"

said he, for once relaxing his habitual restraint of language. "So does pure human love often stand, its feet among the thorns, its face towards the eternal stars, and so does the Church often officiate at its union with the World!"

That was an imaginative view to take of an essentially practical matter, but, given the romantic nature of the surroundings, the artist's feeling for effect, at least, was not at fault.

Moreover, love's splendid egotism can throw a glamour over even the most sordid surroundings, making a palace of a hovel, a park of a back yard. How much more, then, a cathedral of the Augustin-kapelle, that ruined chantry so decked by Nature with the magic of her embroidery that it seemed a part of the forest in which it stood!

Neither Raymond nor Elsa thought of past or future. For them all life and all its possibilities were focussed in the white-hot nucleus of the present. The girl cast no backward glance at the Försthaus, where her father was to dwell in loneliness; the man sent no gaze forward to the well-ordered English parish, containing all that had hitherto claimed his respect and affection.

Father Salomo's terse little homily on the duty of mutual tolerance, affection and fidelity, fell on heedless ears, as far as Raymond was concerned, though Elsa, who had never before heard such a sermon, listened to the discourse as a sort of well-ordered reflection of her own vague ideas, and laid up the priest's words in her heart.

There was no untoward interruption, and Raymond at length led her by the hand to the narrow, two-wheeled carriage which was to convey them to Bad Fichtelstein, on the first stage of their journey.

"Your best way will be through Schattendorf!" said Father Salomo. "It is roundabout, but it avoids the Schloss Wolfenheim, and you will be sooner off the Baron's estate. Besides, the road is easier travelling?"

"Do you think there is any risk of meeting the Baron?" asked Raymond.

"Ach! Who can say?"

"You mean he goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour?" said Raymond, laughing lightly, in sheer joy at having secured the coveted possession.

"No! He does not roar, or you would hear him coming. He is like a cat; he gives no warning before he springs. But I do not think there is any danger. Von Geroldseck left the Försthaus early in the afternoon, is it not so? It is more than likely he went to Schloss Wolfenheim, and will engage the attention of the Baron until a late hour.

"You may be right. I believe he is secretly glad that his daughter will be where she can no longer be frightened by that man!"

"I am sure of it!" interpolated Elsa.

"It is well, then, but, for all that, we must not delay. We have a long journey before us!"

So saying, he placed a cloak which he had brought from Bad Fichtelstein, round Elsa's shoulders, and helped her into the carriage.

Father Salomo raised his shovel hat, and they drove away through the darkening forest.

It was the first journey away from home that Elsa was old enough to remember, and it was proportionately wonderful to her.

The stars seemed to dance amid the branches of the trees as the carriage passed. The cool night air was full of the invigorating scent of the resinous pine. Here and there, a white willow shone like a naked creature in the shadows, and, for part of the way, the Wolfsbach ran parallel with the road. Mellow shadows, delicious odours, rushing stream and whispering pine! What a setting for the jewel of her first and only love! How electrifying was the sense of swift motion! How refreshingly the cold air struck glowing cheeks! What melody was in the rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs on the deserted road! What mystery in the rustling branches and the murmuring waters! Above all, what wonder in the silence and loveliness that made her so deeply conscious of the companionship of the man who sat beside her! For he was the centre and origin of all her impressions. Take everything else away, the stream, the forest and all the beauty of the night, but leave that one average man, and Elsa would have felt the same.

Leave everything else, but remove him, and the journey would have been an ordinary night-drive through the woods, a pleasant experience in fine weather, but one not to be unduly prolonged, and redeemed chiefly by the expectation of well-lighted

hotel and creature-comforts at the other end.

But Elsa's love was more potent alchemy than any with which the Baron von Wolfenheim ever experimented, and she turned to Raymond, saying; "It is a fairy tale!"

"A real one, I hope!" he answered, touching the horse with the whip, for man-like, he was more keenly exercised about the active than the passive, and, fully as he shared Elsa's wondering happiness, he was anxious to place as much distance as possible between the carriage and the neighbourhood of Schloss Wolfenheim.

Otherwise, he would undoubtedly have wished to prolong this marvellous love-flight through the shadows of the forest.

But the greatest secret of the Baron's influence was that his power was more felt in the apprehension than in actual experience of it, and Raymond dared not loiter or even let his attention be distracted by the voice or presence of Elsa.

Like many another man, he had to ignore present happiness to try and make sure of an elusive future?

On leaving the bank of the Wolfsbach, the road gradually rose for some distance to a wayside shrine by a small spring called the Mariabrunnen, from which, by day, there was an extensive prospect over the valley of Kreuzdorf.

When the carriage reached this spot, Elsa caught hold of the driver's arm.

"See," said she, "that solitary light far away on

the top of the mountain yonder, to the right of the Tannenberg."

"Yes! Is that the Schloss Wolfenheim?"

"It is the light in the Raubfenster, the only window visible from this point."

"Is it a signal?"

"How do I know? Yes! But it flashes! Now it is visible! Now it is gone again! Now it shines out once more! Yes, that must be a signal!"

"To whom?"

"I do not know. The Herr Baron sometimes signals thus to my father to visit him at the Castle, but, if my father is there...."

Raymond clenched his teeth and urged the horse sharply down the incline leading to the dense forest between the Mariabrunnen and Schattendorf.

As they entered the belt of verdure, the moon rose above the pine-clad heights on the east and filled the valley with ghostly light. The reticulated shadows of the trees lay across the road like black trellis-work, and here and there the dark, broad band of shade, cast by some nearer trunk, resembled a stream of black water.

The moonlight silvered the profile of Elsa's face, so that it resembled a kind of platinotype silhouette. Raymond glanced out of the corner of his eye, at the clear-cut outline—the straight brow curving inwards to the bridge of the shapely nose, the pure, childlike mouth and softly rounded but firm chin.

He urged the horse to a gallop at the very thought

that another than he should have dared to claim even a contingent reversion to this, the forester's one jewel of price.

But again Elsa nudged his arm.

"Hush!" said she, "canst thou not hear it?"

"What! The wind rising in the forest."

"Nay! It is like the distant howling of wolves, as I have heard them sometimes in winter, and have trembled for my father's safety, when he has been out hunting them with the Herr Baron and his friends. These forests are famous for wolves in winter. The Emperor himself once stayed at Schloss Wolfenheim to hunt them, and a great battue was organised in his honour. Wolves and wild-boars! They are the forester's wealth, quite as much as the timber, for to fell timber is labour, but to hunt, so they say, is pleasure? But hush! The sound is louder now!"

Raymond tightened his hold on the reins.

"But it is impossible wolves can be abroad at this time of year. Besides, we are on a well-travelled road. It must be the wind!"

"But there is scarcely enough wind to ruffle the plumage of a bird. Ach! But listen, how it rises now! It comes from behind us on the road; from the Mariabrunnen. It is... yes!... it is the bay of a hound!"

Raymond shuddered.

"Art thou afraid?" asked Elsa.

He tried to laugh.

"Thou hadst the answer to that question, Elsa, soon after I first met thee. No! I am not afraid of

the mere dog, but suppose someone has put him on our trail!"

"Thou knowest then that it is the same dog?"

"What other could it be? Not a village dog, nor a watch dog from a farm. Here are no farms, and if there were . . . But woa, there! steady now, lass! steady!" exclaimed Raymond, relapsing into the English speech, in order to soothe the mare, which showed signs of getting out of hand.

"The horse is frightened!" he added to Elsa. "I can feel it through the reins."

"Yes! My father once said the reins were like nerves to the good rider or driver. He feels what his animal feels."

The horse now began to gallop with the energy of terror, and Raymond had to exert all his skill to keep it under control.

To see the road swirling beneath the carriage in long parallel streaks was enough to inspire vertigo, and the leaves of the trees on either hand rustled in the wind produced by the speed at which the carriage covered the ground.

But still the baneful sound drew nearer, and Raymond, who glanced over his shoulder at every turn in the road, at length saw a long, black, sinewy creature bounding along in the moonlight. The exceeding swiftness and litheness, yet power of its movements, made him think what an expressive word sleuth-hound was.

"Thou wert right in thy surmise!" said Elsa, looking back when she gathered from the expres-

sion of his face that he had seen something." It is the Teufel!"

"Who has sent him after us? The Herr Baron? It would not be your father."

"No! I expect he wondered why I did not come. I remember now, I forgot even to feed him—for the last time!—He must have grown so impatient that he broke his chain, and tracked me! I should dearly like to have brought him with me, for he is faithful and affectionate, although he is so frightening to look at."

"Why didst thou not? It would have been better to have brought him than to be chased like this. But what are we to do? We do not know that there are not people behind him, and we cannot have him following us all the way to Bad Fichtelstein. If I had a revolver, I would shoot him!"

"Nay! Nay! Do not say that! Remember he is my dog, and it is but his instinct of fidelity that prompts him to follow me."

"Will he not obey thee, if thou orderest him to go back?"

"He might... but suppose there should be *someone* behind him!"

"Then what are we to do?"

"Couldst thou stop the horse?"

"I might, as that brute has stopped baying now that he sees us, and is creeping up as silently as night."

"Then why not take him with us? He could

get into the carriage, and we could drive on, and those who are following, if they do follow, would not know where he was. They might think he had followed us into the forest, or had lost the trail. Besides, the dog is so fond of me that he would defend me even against...."

She faltered.

"Against whom?" asked Raymond, almost roughly.

"The Herr Baron!"

"Oh! I thought thou wert going to say even against me. Well! I cannot deny thee, the first request thou hast made of me. I will pull up at that rising ground yonder."

So Raymond yielded, against his better judgment, and when the huge creature lay down quietly at its mistress' feet, and raised its eyes to her face with that look of canine trust which few human beings can emulate, he had an uneasy sense that he was jealous of a mere dog.

But for very shame, he could not own to such a feeling, even to himself. He explained away the sensation, partly by the fact that the animal had been given to Elsa by the Baron von Wolfenheim, and partly by his desire that his bride's future should be hampered by no claim from her past.

He was so young that life to him appeared all to-morrow, and he had not learned that every day drags behind it a lengthening chain of yesterdays.

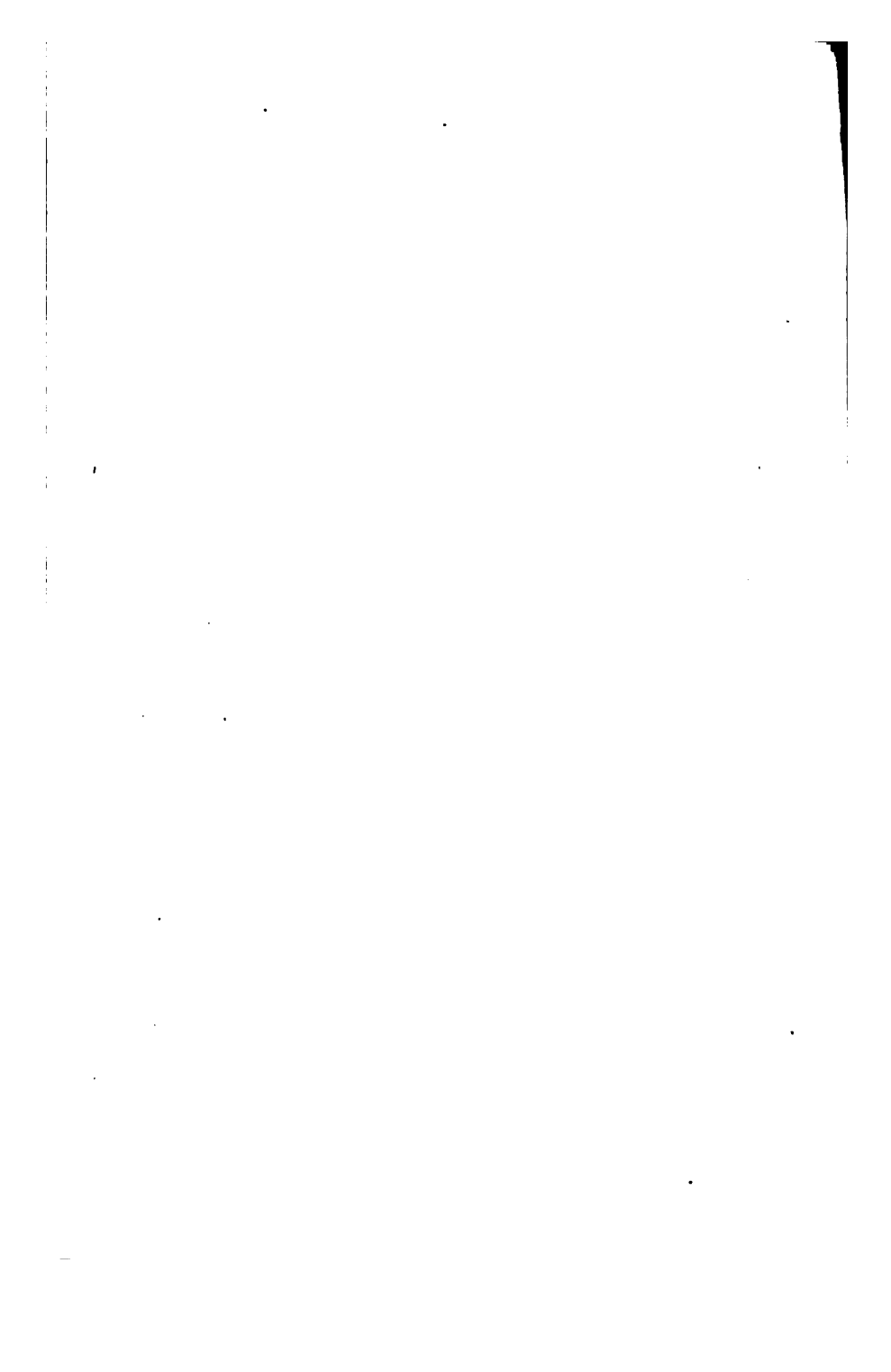
So the carriage drove through the sleeping vil-

lage of Schättendorf and out of the forest on to the main road leading from the capital city of Ludwigsburg to the popular resort of Bad Fichtelstein.



Act the Second.

IN THE WORLD.



Act the Second

IN THE WORLD.

I.

CLANG! Clang!

Now singly, now in triple majors, the eight-bell chime which is one of the glories of Swangate, was pealing forth from the Perpendicular tower of the massive Norman parish-church.

Labourers in the fields on the shadeless, chalky downs at the back of the town, paused in their work to listen to the joyful euphony. Sailors on outward bound ships far out at sea, welcomed the distant peal as a last farewell message from the homeland.

Nevertheless, the chimes were heard with alloyed joy by several of the people whom it more or less directly concerned, for the ringers were ringing a welcome home to the Rector's son and his bride.

Swangate Rectory, as visitors to the town will remember, is a new house some distance from the church, built on the leeward or eastern side of Penfold Point, fronting the generally calm expanse of Swangate Bay. The western or weather side

looks towards the open sea, and the long spine of partially submerged rocks, forming the spit, is a visible boundary between the smooth waters of the bay and the breaking billows that roll in from the south west. The open ocean can be seen from the upper windows at the back of the Rectory, but the drawing-room, which is in the front of the house, faces eastwardly. In the bow-window of this pleasant apartment sat Jermyn Brand, reading a letter.

Apparently his thoughts had wandered from the matter in hand, for the note was lying loosely in his broad-tipped but somewhat delicately wrought fingers, and he was gazing idly at the sea below. The view had the peculiarity that owing to the narrowness of the foreshore between the house and the tide-mark, the intervening beach was invisible from any spot more than two feet distant from the window, and the impression produced on the spectator, was that of looking from the cabin window of a vessel approaching land. The prospect began with the sea and ended in a diminishing line of chalk-cliffs, forming the promontory which divides Swangate Bay from the entrance to Branksea Harbour, and acts as wind-breaker to the sandy coast beyond, on which flourishes the favourite invalid-resort and watering place of Pinebourne.

With what Brand described as his 'usual unusualness,' Raymond Eager, instead of coming by train along the little branch railway of which Swangate is the terminal station, had elected to alight at Pinebourne, which is on the main line, and complete

his journey home by the local steamer, which makes the passage to Swangate twice or thrice a day during the season.

It was now the end of the season and the boat's last trip was by no means the least in importance, inasmuch as it was the means of bringing home Raymond and his bride.

When Jermyn Brand looked up from his letter, the appearance of the steamer round the chalk islets off the promontory, had been the signal to the ringers to commence ringing. In another twenty minutes, she would reach the landing stage, where a carriage was in waiting to convey the expected guests to the Rectory.

Jermyn glanced again at the letter lying on his knee.

"My dear Brand," it ran, "many thanks for your congratulations, old boy, but sympathies would have been equally appropriate, for somehow, now that success seems within my grasp, I can't help feeling just a trifle afraid, and wonder whether, according to the wisdom of the Ancients, concerning which my classical governor will enlighten you, I am called upon to sacrifice my dearest possession to the gods. Yet, curiously enough, it is only since I won my dearest possession, that I have begun to win success. The one seems to bring the other, as you yourself remember having seen at Apperille...."

Brand smiled to himself.

"Fancy old Ray having such qualms," he said

to himself, "when he always seems to think that the sunlight was made for him!"

At this moment the door opened, and the rector's wife came bustling into the room.

"Trying to catch a first sight of them?" she asked, coming to the window.—"The bells told me the steamer was round the point. The sound of wedding bells always seems to make one cheerful in spite of oneself, doesn't it, Mr. Brand?"

"You have the authority of the proverb, Mrs. Eager, but, in spite of that, they do sometimes emit rather a grisly jangle, don't they?"

"Oh! I know, you are a heretic in the matter of bells, and think they ought to be suppressed in the interests of invalids and brain-workers. But, for all that, don't be cynical and heterodox on the present occasion."

"Yes! I suppose merriment is obligatory!" said Jermy, with a mock sigh. "We have to learn how to produce smiles or tears to order. But the steamer's coming in now. Can you distinguish any of the passengers? A mother's eye is better than a telescope!"

"Yes! There they are!" said Mrs. Eager. "At least, that's Ray on the bridge. I suppose his wife is in the saloon. He is waving his cap to some people on shore. How fond he is of being chief actor in any sort of ceremony. I should have thought he would have preferred coming home quietly, after leaving us for so long in the dark as to his movements. I'm sure we are all very indebted to you, Mr. Brand."

I do hate mysteries, and, if it hadn't been for you, I believe Ray would have left us in ignorance of his marriage up to this very day."

"Don't be so hard on him, as all that!" said the artist, rising. "It's always a difficult thing for a man to come home in cold blood and say he is married. And in his case...."

"Yes! Yes! I know! That poor Tony! I really am afraid he behaved very badly, and yet she has taken it splendidly...."

"And in his case," imperturbably continued Brand, who always completed his sentences, regardless of interruption, "his own delay had made it harder for him. But, as I said to him, it's always better to tell than to be found out, whatever it is. Boys learn that at school!"

"And we're very much obliged to you, Mr. Brand. Of course, for some reasons, it is a good thing Ray is settled. He has been such a butterfly—or is it moths?—always getting his wings singed. I hope he'll begin to do some practical work now, at least as soon as his infatuation for his wife—I suppose he is infatuated with her!—has toned down."

"He seems very fond of her!" said the artist gravely. "But, as you observe, marriage does tone down, like a picture, or else the paint peels off."

"Oh! don't say that, Mr. Brand. There's too much paint and too much peeling off about marriage, as it is. I'm sure, I hope my son will be happy in his marriage, but happiness like everything else must be paid for by practical work. It's a consolation

his wife is of such good family. Perhaps her connections will be a help—not here of course, but, if Ray settles in London. I don't know much about Germans, Germans of good family, I mean, for of course one's idea of the lower orders is that the men are beer-drinking sausage-eaters, and the women fat, frowsy hausfraus! But the Geroldsecks are well-born, aren't they?"

"High well-born, as they say in Germany! The Von Geroldsecks really are one of the oldest families, and, as for fat, frowsy women, your son's wife is certainly not that. All the people in the street used to turn to look at her abroad, so Ray told me, she was so distinguished in appearance. I assure you they make a handsome couple."

"Well! Of course, I'm glad she is nice-looking, but I don't attach much importance to that. A woman's looks are purely her husband's affair. If she was a cripple, I should welcome her as Ray's wife. But what I'm so afraid of is that he is crippling his own career...."

"A beautiful woman makes a cripple of a clever man, while a crippled wife is often a crutch to a stupid one? That is a clever saying of yours, Mrs. Eager!"

"But I don't quite mean that. I mean to say, socially, Ray may not be so welcome now he is married. A man's career depends so much on social success. You must have found it so, as an artist, Mr. Brand. Unless one is known and talked about...."

"Oh! Raymond will be talked about. His marriage alone will be an interesting subject for some time. All the women he knows will be curious to see how it turns out. As for his work, that must be talked about on its merits, or not at all. I, personally, don't believe in advertisement reputations. Literature and art are not soap."

"No, but soap pays better!"

"Even so, happiness doesn't depend on dividends, and happiness is the main thing!"

"Yes! Of course that's true in the abstract, but practically, you know, Mr. Brand.... practically! It's easy to say those things, but only satisfactory when one can afford to say them. You can, but Ray's banking account has to be made yet! To be frank with you, I would rather he had married Miss Carew. Of course she is not of such good family, but...."

"You mean beer is thicker than blood?"

"How? I don't understand you."

"Well! Carew's Fine Swangate Ales are drunk as much as ever, in spite of the parish Temperance Guild. A brewery bringing in ten thousand a year or so, is better than heraldic quarterings."

"Don't be sarcastic, Mr. Brand. Of course I do think it advisable for a wife to bring a little money to her husband, especially when he has Ray's temperament and tastes. It's only fair for both partners to contribute to the joint capital, and a woman feels so much more independent when she has money of her own, and her husband respects

her so much more. But I wasn't alluding to that. I meant that we had known Tony Carew for such a long time, that she was accustomed to us and we to her, that she was almost one of us already in fact; whereas one never quite knows how one is going to get on with a stranger, especially a foreigner. Why, she can hardly speak English, I suppose, and the smattering of Ollendorf I learnt at school..."

"She's learning English very quickly. Ray has been teaching her, and she is very quick in the upstake, as they say."

"Yes, but her point of view must be different from ours, whereas Tony—Oh! Did I tell you what she said when she heard of the marriage? Her mother told me, in confidence, so don't let it go any further. She said, 'I suppose I ought to send back all Ray's letters and presents!' Wasn't that delicate of her, poor girl? But, of course, it was an over-refinement, as there never was any actual formal engagement, though I must say it was more or less understood, ever since they were quite children in fact. I must say I'm surprised at Raymond."

"I think he was surprised at himself, Mrs. Eager. But, after all, it is very easy for a man to deceive himself about the sort of liking for a girl's companionship, which dates from childhood. It becomes a matter of habit, and love, as I take it, is not that!"

"The best and most durable affection is, and in marriage liking is more required than love."

"In many instances, but there are exceptions."

Moreover, Raymond, at his present stage, is the sort of man who would never do what was expected of him, for the simple reason that it was expected. And, as he told me, his feeling for his wife came upon him like a great wave and carried him off his feet, whereas his affection for Miss Carew was a quiet, steady-going friendship. The one, as he described it, was a canoe going down the rapids, and the other a barge in a canal. But anyhow, we must reconcile ourselves to accomplished facts now. I see no reason why Ray shouldn't be happy and get on. His wife certainly seems to have brought him luck. Did I tell you how I met him?—It was at the Casino at Apperille-sur-mer. He took lodgings, there, with his wife, you know, after they had left Germany. Well, I noticed this tall, remarkable looking girl standing by the gaming table and was wondering who she was, when I heard Raymond's old, familiar voice ask, 'Shall I try my luck, Elsa? What number shall I put my stake on?' 'Thirty-six!' said she, and sure enough, thirty-six was the winning horse . . ."

"I thought it was at the Casino, not at the races."

"So it was! It was the game called *Petits chevaux*. Thirty-six turned up, and Ray got seven napoleons for the one he had risked. Then I spoke to him, and he introduced me to his wife. I went home with him to his lodgings, and he told me all about it. He was staying at Apperille for the honeymoon, so he said, partly to teach his wife English, and partly because he was waiting to see how he could

best break the news to his family. I told him the longer he put it off the harder it would be, and offered to help him, with what result you know. However, the gambling win was not his only piece of good fortune. He wrote several things while he was away, and they were all accepted and paid for, and now he is engaged upon a play, which he has every chance of getting read by a manager. I'm glad he has got such encouragement, for one of the great secrets of achievement is belief in oneself, and repeated disappointments early in his career make a man sceptical of his own powers. It is only the really strong men who are not cast down by rebuff."

"And you don't think Ray is really strong in that sense?"

"Oh! It is too early to express any opinion. Time is the only test of strength."

"He was always very obstinate!" mused Mrs. Eager.

"Obstinacy is not perseverance, though. There are many obstinate people who yet throw a thing up, when they don't succeed at once. The failing is part of their obstinacy in fact.—But, I see the steamer is in!"

"Yes! Just listen to those bells!"

"I expect the ringers are inspired by Carew's 'entire'. Somewhat ironical of Destiny, isn't it, for Antonia Carew's father to supply the inspiration for welcoming home Raymond's bride?"

"You're a dreadful man!" retorted Mrs. Eager,

laughing. "But there they are, crossing the gang-way! Look at Ray bowing like a foreign prince! He is very ridiculous! One would think he was a schoolboy home for the holidays! Ah! There's his wife! Yes, she is distinguished looking, though a shade too tall! But what on earth is that following her?—A calf?"

Jermyn Brand laughed.

"That's her dog, a wonderful animal!"

"Monster, you mean! What on earth are we to do with such an ungainly creature? He can't share Towser's kennel! They'd fight."

"He always sleeps outside their door, I believe!"

"He can't do it here. The rector hates dogs in the house. But I suppose we had better go to the door now to welcome them. They'll want some tea too, poor things, after travelling. I hope she won't be too tired to appear at dinner to-night. The Carews are coming!"

II.

THE rector sat at the head of the table. Elsa, as the bride, was on his right hand. Antonia Carew was on his left. Next to her sat Raymond with Mrs Carew for neighbour. On Elsa's right-hand was Arthur Seaton Eager, Raymond's brother and a Cambridge don. Mrs. Eager at the foot of the table had Mr Carew, brewer and ex-mayor of Swan-gate, on her left, and Jermyn Brand on her right.

The party was Elsa's first experience of the amenities of social life, and she was naturally anxious to appear at her best. Therefore, she did not talk much except to reply when spoken to, and was content to be purely decorative and observant.

She admired Antonia Carew and thought what beautiful brown eyes she had. She was captivated by the rector's quiet courtesy and amused at the way in which Mr. Carew, with his loud voice, hectorated the conversation. The don, with his boyish face but magisterial expression, heightened by his spectacles, rather awed her. She was also rather afraid of the two married women who, she felt, were taking stock of her. Of all the strange faces,

that which most pleased her was Jermyn Brand's. She had but seen him for a moment or two at Apperille in the crowd of the Casino, so that it was only now that she had an opportunity of observing him sufficiently to discover what manner of man he really was. His grave face—grave, that is, by contrast with the bright ingenuousness of Raymond's—gave her an impression of strength. But it was a friendly strength, very different from the sinister power of the Baron von Wolfenheim. In this impression she was not mistaken, for Brand was one of those rare self-contained men in whom children and animals, with their intuitive perception of character, display an immediate and instinctive trust.

But while Elsa was observing, others were talking, foremost in the debate being Mr. Carew, the ex-mayor and brewer, who had a weakness for fancying himself a member of Parliament.

"And so, you say, she refused to help...?" asked Mrs. Eager.

"Absolutely," answered Mrs. Carew. "So strange of a lady in her position to take up such an attitude, isn't it?"

"Name! Name!" cried the ex-mayor, who had not been attending.

"Why, Lady Ulverscroft," said the rector's wife. "We wanted her to preside over a stall at the parish bazaar, or at least lend her name as patroness. But she is really quite eccentric. All the Ulverscrofts are, so they say!"

"An atheistical old devil dodger, that's what I call her!" observed Mr. Carew emphatically.

Elsa looked up.

"Don't be shocked, Mrs. Raymond," said Mrs. Carew. "It's only a way of speaking, you know, and not really any allusion to the gentleman who is never mentioned in polite society!"

"Who is that gentleman?" she innocently enquired. "The Herr Baron?"

"*Her bar own!* What does that mean? I don't speak German myself!" said the ex-mayor.

"The Baron von Wolfenheim!" answered Elsa.

"Bless my life, what is she talking about?" exclaimed Mr. Carew.

"She is referring to a German nobleman!" explained Raymond.

"But what the... dickens has a German nobleman to do with the Old Gentleman?"

"My wife misunderstood you. She doesn't understand English very well yet. What did you think Mr. Carew said, Elsa?"

"I think he said something about the devil—*der Teufel!*"

"You see, it was a misunderstanding, Mr. Carew!"

"Not at all! Not at all! Question, as they say in the House! What *did* you think I said about the Old Gentleman? Go on, Mrs. Raymond! Don't be afraid! There are no traitors on this side of the Speaker's Table!"

"I know not what you say, but I heard the word *devil*, and I wonder if he is also even in England

already. I hope I leave such horrible creature in the forest."

"What does she mean, Raymond?" asked the rector's wife.

"Oh nothing, mother! She is only trying to refer to the popular superstitions in her part of Germany, where they believe in diabolic possession, the evil eye, and similar nonsense. She is surprised that such notions exist in England. That's all!"

"Oh, I see!—No, Elsa, you needn't imagine we are quite so credulous here. England is a Protestant country."

"Protestant! What means that..." began Elsa, but a warning look from Raymond checked her, and Mr. Carew blustered into the vacuum with,

"It really is scandalous for a person in Lady Ulverscroft's position—a good old family like that, which ought to be a staunch prop of church and state. If the aristocracy themselves begin to lay the axe to the tree, is it any wonder that these Radicals and Socialists help to fell it? Now for my part, I consider that I hold Liberal views—every man for himself..."

"Better not finish the saying!" interpolated the Cambridge don.

"Why?... Oh! Ah! I see! Of course not! I forgot the hindmost part. But, as I say, I am all for the freedom of the individual—freedom of capital, freedom of labour—self and company has been my motto through life..."

"It's the motto of a good many people who don't

proclaim it so ingenuously," whispered Jermyn Brand to his right-hand neighbour.

"But," continued Mr. Carew, "lay a finger on church or state, and I pipe all hands and clear the decks for action. So when..."

"I only wish all our parishioners were as zealous as you, Mr. Carew," said the rector's wife sweetly, in the hope of causing a redistribution of conversation.

"So when I heard of this church bazaar, I at once told Mrs. Carew to do her best to help you make it a success. Now I have an idea..."

"Really?"

"Yes! Why not have an international bazaar—flags of all nations, you know, and costumes? That's the main thing! Costumes please the ladies! Why not have a German stall with Mrs. Raymond to preside? You will help the church, will you not, Mrs. Raymond?"

"The church! My father believes not in churches. He has told me nature is honoured more in loneliness under the forest trees or by the waves of the sea. He says, where many men come, nature flies away!"

Elsa spoke distinctly enough this time for everyone to understand, and an Anarchist bomb could scarcely have caused more sensation than her speech.

There was a moment's uncomfortable silence; then everyone began talking at once, while Raymond gnawed his moustache.

"Surely, Ray, your wife's not an atheist like Lady Ulverscroft?" whispered Antonia Carew.

Raymond shook his head and looked anxiously at his father.

The rector nodded, and give a signal to the don, who rose, glass in hand, to propose the health of the bride, his flow of the customary compliments being punctuated by stentorian "Hear! Hear's!" from the ex-mayor.

Raymond was about to reply on Elsa's behalf, when the most appalling uproar was suddenly heard from the back of the house.

"Sounds like a steamer-siren!" remarked Mrs. Carew.

"It is the Teufel!" exclaimed Elsa in German, upstarting from her seat.

"Don't be superstitious, my dear!" said her mother-in-law. "Besides, this is a clergyman's house!"

"Oh! She doesn't mean what you mean, mother!" said Raymond impatiently. "She means that brute of a dog. Teufel's its name."

"They must be fighting. I knew they would!" exclaimed Mrs. Eager. "Ring the bell. Go and separate them, Ray!"

He hurried to the door, but came full tilt against Linstead, the rector's coachman and factotum.

"For the Lord's sake, come and separate 'em, Mr. Raymond!" said the man breathlessly. "It's that dog of yours, gnawed through his rope and is doing poor old Towser to death. I tried to part 'em with a garden rake, but that black brute took no more notice than if it had been a straw on his back. And he turned and eyed me, as if to say

'I'll go for *you* presently, as soon as I've done with this job! Mrs. Fitch and the maids are in fits, and have locked and bolted the kitchen door.'

"What does he say?" asked Elsa, who had not understood the man's rapid speech and somewhat broad pronunciation.

"Teufel is killing my mother's dog! Thou hadst better come thyself and call him off!"

The girl had never imagined that Raymond could speak so roughly, but she obeyed at once, and followed her husband to the back door. Jermyn Brand hurried after them, saying, "I'm generally rather successful in dealing with dogs. Perhaps I may be able to help."

Mr. Carew began to improve the occasion by contrasting the boorishness of foreign dogs with the inoffensiveness of the native breed, but his words were lost as the whole party flocked after the artist.

By the intermittent cloudy moonlight, they saw the sleek German hound standing across the prostrate body of the brown English retriever, near the door of the latter's kennel. The white paving stones of the yard were stained the ugliest of hues and Towser was apparently dead.

"Teufel!" called Elsa.

For a moment the animal hesitated, as if loth to leave his quarry, but obedience prevailed, and he crept to his mistress' feet and licked the hem of her dress.

But his jaws were slavering blood, and the white bridal robe was soon stained with red.

Antonia Carew shivered.

"How dreadfully unlucky!" she whispered.

Raymond overheard her, and their eyes met, to be immediately averted.

"What's to be done now?" he asked.

"Better shoot the brute!" said Mr. Carew. "I know those kind of dogs and, once they've tasted blood, they're no better than ravening wild beasts."

"Teufel is going to be shot, Elsa!" said Raymond.

The girl shook her head, and put her arms round the animal, as if to protect it, with the result that the sleeves and front of her bodice were soon flecked with the same ugly spots as the skirt.

"I couldn't hold a gun, my hand's that unsteady with the fright I got," said Linstead.

"Oh! I'll do it, if you get the gun," remarked Mr. Carew. "I'm not a Colonel of Volunteers for nothing!"

"Come, Elsa!" observed Raymond. "I see no help for it."

"There's no need!" said Jermyn Brand, who had been stooping over the retriever. "Towser's not dead. I think he'll pull round, with care, though there's a nasty tear in his throat. It's not a case of murder, only of assault with intent, so there need be no execution."

"That's all very well, but the brute has tasted blood," grumbled Mr. Carew.

"And the Swangate Volunteers haven't!" laughed the artist. "But they must wait for another foreign invasion, before they do. For the present, I should

suggest locking the hound up in the coach-house, and sending Linstead to fetch the vet. to attend to Towser."

"O yes! Poor Towser! We must save him, if possible, poor old fellow! Run down to the town at once, Linstead, and bring Mr. Coster back with you!" said the rector's wife. "Towser is the first consideration!"

"Now!" remarked Brand in German to Elsa. "If you will bring your dog—he'll come more willingly with you!—we will lock him in the coach-house!"

Elsa rose from her stooping posture, and placing her hand on Teufel's neck led him down the garden after the artist.

When the latter had shut and locked the door of the coach-house, she turned to him and held out her hand, saying "You have been a friend to me, and I thank you. I could not bear to have Teufel shot!"

"Don't be afraid! I would take him myself rather than that. Anyone can see he is a valuable dog. But I am sorry for your dress. It looks as if you had been committing a murder."

"Ach! It will wash! I have seen my father come home splashed with blood, after cutting the throat of wild-boars."

"Hadst thou not better go to thy room and change, Elsa?" asked Raymond in German. "I cannot reply to the toast of thy health, when thou art spotted with blood, like that!"

III.

"I DON'T wonder you are afraid of losing your dearest possession, now I have seen her," said Jermyn Brand to Raymond, as they strolled together out to the end of Penfold Point. "She certainly has quite the angel-girl appearance, which you said. Of course I thought she was notable when I saw her in the Casino at Apperille, but the impression was too fleeting to leave any permanent picture."

Raymond smiled.

He had a failing for estimating the value of his possessions by the praise bestowed on them by his friends.

"I hope her unconventionality won't be too much for the people here," he made answer.

"I don't see why it should. There is unconventionality and unconventionality. In bloomers on a bicycle it certainly repels; but in your wife's case, it is quite different. Besides, she is not unconventional in your sense of the word at all...."

"What is my sense?"

"An affectation of despising the ordinary! Forgive the use of the scalpel!"

Raymond laughed.

"I'm accustomed to having my failings dissected by you. But about Elsa....?"

"Well! She is simply and perfectly natural! She gives one the same sensation as the scent of a wild sweetbriar. At the dinner table last night, when that Boanerges Bumble was thumping his pulpit, I mentally compared her to a rose...."

"Among thorns?"

"No!—In a vegetable garden!"

"Rather rough on the others,—on Tony Carew, for instance!"

"Oh! She's a fruit, not a flower.—A peach, say, sunning itself on a southern wall. Most men, it's true, would rather eat fruit than smell flowers, but I don't, nor, clearly, do you yourself!"

"Well, no! I suppose not! All the same, Tony is a dear, sweet girl and I'm afraid I have behaved badly to her, but really, I don't believe she thinks so. She received me just the same as ever last night, and we prattled away as merrily as when we were children. She knows a lot too, and has read nearly everything worth reading. She was greatly struck with the idea of my play."

"Hum! Nobody knows so much as those who know enough not to be critical of our own knowledge."

"Don't be ironical! It's unfair, for she is critical, a very good critic. She quite took the conceit out of one of my ideas for a situation, and I'm much obliged to her. I shouldn't have seen the flaw myself. It was about a woman and...."

"Only woman understands woman!"

"That's about it, to a certain extent at least."

"Why not have consulted your wife?"

"My dear Jermyn! She has never seen a play in her life. Her ignorance of literature is so stupendous as to be quite a positive quality."

"But I daresay her intuitive perception of people and things as they are, is all the keener for that. We others, whose experience of life is largely the vicarious experience gained by reading, are so disposed to measure what we see by the standard of what we've read. And if it doesn't come up to scale, why we make it do so!"

"Yes, that's all very well in theory, but not in practice. A person might have a better eye for colour than you have, for instance, but unless they knew how to paint, it wouldn't follow that they'd make a better picture. Elsa wouldn't have any idea of construction, or plot, or even of style. No! That argument of yours won't hold water. What was behind such a feeble outpost?"

"Only this, that, if I were you, I wouldn't consult Antonia Carew too much about my work or anything else. Confidential consultations with a girl, in which a man's wife doesn't share"

Raymond laughed ringingly.

"You croaking corbie! Why, Elsa to me is the embodiment of everything that is worth having. She is a wonder at which I never cease to marvel. I grow fonder of her every day."

"Long may it continue! But you spoke rather

harshly last night. I saw a pained look in her face."

"About that wretched dog! Well, I was put out. Is it surprising? Of course, it wasn't her fault, poor girl, in a way, but there—I have a prejudice against that dog. Come and sit on the rocks below the coastguard's—it's quite warm for November, isn't it?—and I'll tell you how it came into her possession."

Jermyn Brand filled his pipe, and settled down to listen, as Raymond narrated his experiences in the forest.

The sea was checkered light and dark, by passing squalls. A ketch was slowly beating across one of the lighter and calmer spaces on its way to Branksea Harbour. Brand watched the boat until its sails suddenly filled to the flow of wind and the craft went about on a freer tack. While listening to Raymond's voice, he mentally compared the course of the fisher boat to the course of life,—a series of tacks more or less close to the wind towards an invisible and occasionally unattainable haven.

"You see," concluded Eager. "I have some excuse for my dislike of the brute."

"Yes! If jealousy is retrospective, as I suppose it is. But you say you never even saw this Baron von Wolfenheim?"

"No! I only felt his baneful influence. That was the worst of it. He seemed to wrap one round like a fog, and one never got at the real man.

But, by the way, the priest of Kreuzdorf, said he had seen you at Schattendorf. Didn't you come across the Baron?"

"That was six years ago. Yes! I did hear something about him, and, if I don't make a mistake, there was an ugly story about his wife...."

"His wife! There, I was sure he was married, the scoundrel; Elsa's father was so odd about it."

"Not so fast, Ray! He is a widower now!"

"But what was the story!"

"It was in Paris. His wife died rather suddenly...."

"Poison?"

"So some said, but the more accepted version was that he had been testing some medicinal decoction of his own brewing. He was mixed up with some peculiar alchemistic sect or other."

"But wasn't there an enquiry?"

"I don't remember, but all that came out was that she had taken the wrong medicine by mistake."

"I wonder Father Salomo didn't tell me!"

"Ten to one if he knew. It was merely a piece of Paris society scandal. Count Vaszary told me. I had a studio in Paris in those days and Vaszary was a young attaché. He is secretary of Embassy in London now. Baron von Wolfenheim also was in the diplomatic service, but soon after his wife died, he either resigned or was transferred, or placed *en disponibilité*, I forget which. However, of course, when I was at Schattendorf and heard from Father

Habingsreiter about the extraordinary nobleman, I guessed it was the same person. From what you say, he is clearly a person to be avoided, but I don't see that you can justly invent a new proverb 'Like master, like dog!'"

"No! But Elsa is so silly over the brute."

"Well! What woman isn't when she makes a pet of an animal? Even your mother and Towser! But really, that dog, you know, lends an air of distinction to your wife. To see her pure beauty protected, as it were, by that black hound, is quite a picture—Una and the lion, and that sort of thing. Such a dog is an aristocratic appanage!"

"Do you really think so?"

"Certainly I do. With that animal marching sedately behind her, your wife looks like a foreign princess. Your own father made that remark to me!"

"Really? Ah, well, of course, I shan't interfere with Elsa keeping the dog, only I hope he won't make another scene like last night's."

"Yes! That was unfortunate, especially as it ruined your wife's dress. By the way, why does she wear long sleeves? I should think her arms must be very shapely, and the whiteness of her skin is remarkable."

"She is obliged to, because of the mark."

"Mark! What mark?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you that episode? It was another of the amiable baron's interesting experiments. He made a sort of tattoo mark on her arm, like this."

And Raymond drew a diagram on the ground with the point of his stick.

"She never belonged to this sect, I suppose!"

"No! He wanted her to go and see 'wonderful things', as he called them, but she refused, and, for once, her father, who otherwise seems quite under the Baron's thumb, rebelled and took his daughter's part."

"H'm! It's a strange story!"

"Worse than that! Diabolical, I call it!"

Jermyn Brand looked shrewdly at Raymond's face.

"You've no idea what the mark means, I suppose?"

"Not the least in the world! Have you?"

"How should I?—However, as I say, the Baron is evidently a man to be avoided. It is a good thing your wife is removed from his influence. But what are you going to do? Are you going to London?"

"No! Not yet, at least. I want Elsa to know English better before I introduce her as my wife. So I have taken Purlstone Cottage for three months from Mrs. Wadman, who has been ordered abroad for the winter. I shall be much better able to work down here, than I should be in London, and I want to get my play done before Christmas, so that it can be produced in the spring. Everything depends on that, for me, you see."

"Well! Don't let it come between you and your wife; that's all!"

"You mean Antônia Carew? I'm not likely to sail too near the wind in that quarter! Even if I

did, Elsa knows she is an old friend, and as for ever being jealous, Elsa doesn't know what the feeling is. She asked me once what jealousy felt like! You'll be staying here till New Year, I suppose?"

"Yes, for the sake of the light. I can't paint in a London fog!"

"Then you can watch over me—and her!"

IV.

"It is no use!" said Raymond throwing down his pen impatiently, as he sat one morning at his writing-table in the bow-window of Purlstone Cottage. "I am stuck, fairly stuck, I know what goes before and I know how the thing will work out, but I cannot get the connecting link, to work up to the final scene! Asking me about dinner has quite put me off my line of thought."

"Why work up, Raymond?" asked Elsa.

"Why work up? My beloved Elsa, the question shows your ignorance. A dramatic moment loses all its force if it comes too abruptly. The great secret in everything is to excite expectation."

Elsa laid her cool hand on his brow.

"Thy head is hot, my dear one!" said she, relapsing into German speech.

"English, Elsa, English!"

"Ach, yes! I forgot! So, then, your forehead is hot. You stay too long in the house! Go out for a walk and let the sea wind blow on your face. That may help you. As for me, I know I cannot help. I am, as you say, ignorant.

"It is adorable ignorance! said he, looking up at the fresh, young face, gazing so lovingly down at his own.

"I wish that your mother would think that. I do not care about what the others think, but you know how I have longed for a mother."

"Yes, yes, dear! But don't trouble about it! She'll come round in time, and so will they all. They all admire you, as it is, but they merely don't understand you."

"Yet there is so little to understand!"

"That is just it? You are too simple. If you would even pretend to be artificial, you would get on better. You say what you think..."

"Should I not? do not you?"

"Only to my closest friends."

"And the others?"

"I say what I think will please them, or at least, I take care not to say what will offend them. One can't become popular by treading on other people's corns!"

"How! I do not understand."

"Well! By offending their prejudices, and you often do so quite needlessly. Take religion, for instance! My mother is a religious woman, and of course religion is my father's profession. Well! Why not agree with what they tell you, even if privately you don't quite believe it, or see its reasonableness? One has to conform outwardly to a lot of things one doesn't understand, or care about. I don't want to force you to believe anything, but only to make yourself agreeable. In fact, I think

that is the essence of religion,—to make oneself agreeable!"

"My father told..."

"Now, Elsa, I have asked you so often not to quote your father. *I* don't mind it, but that's just one of the things that other people resent."

"Dearest, forgive me! I forgot."

"Of course, I forgive. But, Elsa, remember you wish to help me, and the best way for you to do that at present is to please my friends. Above all, I beg of you not to refer to the old life in Germany—you do not wish to return to it or regret you left it, do you?"

"Thou knowest!" said Elsa softly.

"German again! However, I forgive you! But, as I say, do not talk of what happened at the forest house, or quote the sayings and opinions of your father or..."

"The Baron von Wolfenheim?"

"Exactly! I did not wish to mention his name. It burns my lips. He has no influence, *here* at least, and his opinions carry no weight. Forget him as you would a bad dream."

"I wish that it would be as easy to forget evil things as pleasant things."

"That it *were* as easy, not that it *would be*! Don't mind my correcting you again, Elsa! It is for your good!"

"I know that, Raymond!" said Elsa cheerily. "And now, for your own good, go out to cool your head by the sea."

"Do you think me so hot-headed, then?"

"Yes! Your head is very hot!"

Raymond laughed, and, kissing her lightly on the cheek, went out, whistling softly the air of a German *Volkslied*.

But Elsa sighed, and wondered whether he understood her any better than the other members of his family. She knew that, in too many respects, she could not meet him on his own level, but she wished he would treat her less like a child and more as he treated Antonia Carew, for instance. Yet she could not admit any imperfection in Raymond. It was solely her own ignorance that was at fault, her simplicity that was unable to comprehend his many-sided nature. He was so clever and so popular that it was wonderful for him to love her at all, so how could he help displaying a consciousness of his own condescension? He spoke of her as an angel, but she thought of him as an archangel, if not as something greater. As she sat by the window, thinking in this wise, the garden gate clicked and Elsa saw her mother-in-law coming up to the house.

That was nothing unusual, for Mrs. Eager considered it a matter of duty to visit her son's wife daily, and give her a lesson in domestic economy. What accelerated Elsa's pulses was to see that the rector's wife held in her hand a letter with a German stamp.

She ran to the door to meet her, and Mrs. Eager handed her an envelope with the Kreuzdorf postmark, saying, "This came to the Rectory by last

night's post, so I brought it over myself. How old-fashioned your correspondent seems to be, using sand instead of blotting paper! You can feel the grit, if you pass your fingers lightly over the address."

"It is from my father!" said Elsa.

"Ah! The Ritter von Geroldseck? Then, open it, Elsa! Don't stand on ceremony with me! I know you must be anxious to learn what he has to say!"

Elsa broke the seal, and turned to the window to read the missive. Her mother-in-law regarded her with a look of interrogation, as if she fully expected to be informed of the contents. Her face said "Well?" as clearly as if she had uttered the word.

But Elsa did not gratify her curiosity, and, crumpling up the letter with a gesture of annoyance, thrust it in her pocket.

"I hope there's no bad news?" said Mrs. Eager.

"Yes, there is bad news!" was the direct answer.

"No illness, I hope?"

"No, not illness!"

"Ah! Then a family matter?"

"Yes! A family matter!"

"I hope it won't interfere with Raymond's plans!"

"I myself also hope not!"

"Where is Raymond?"

"He has gone for a walk. If he were here, I might tell you what is in this letter, but he has told me again only this morning already, not to

“speak of my father, or . . . other people whom I knew in Germany!”

“What an extraordinary boy! Surely he is not ashamed of your relations?”

“Nay! He is not ashamed. He has often told me he is proud of me, and, if he is proud of me, he cannot be ashamed of my father.”

“Of course not, but still . . . However, I must leave you to settle it between you. I'm sorry I have not been the bearer of good news.—But who is this coming up the path to the house? Surely not your father himself?”

Elsa glanced out of the window, and her face went white. For an instant, she yearned to throw herself in Mrs. Eager's arms,—the maternal arms that she had never known, but longed to feel sustaining her. But the marvellous composure which was so marked a peculiarity of her nature, did not forsake her even at this juncture.

“It is a friend of my father from Germany!” she said slowly.

“Really! And what is his name?”

“The Baron von Wolfenheim!”

“The Baron? How nice of him to come and call! Fancy his finding his way to such a remote spot as Swangate! You can just introduce me, and then I must be off back to the Rectory. What a pity Ray is out! But, gracious me, just listen to that dog of yours barking! I don't like him, as you know, but he is certainly an excellent housedog, to give warning like that of the approach of a stranger!”

"They are not strangers! I mean the Teufel is no stranger to the Herr Baron. He is the last of the old Wolfenheim breed, and was given me by the Baron himself."

"Then he is really what Mr. Brand called him—an aristocratic appanage! But here is your friend."

The maid opened the door and ushered in the visitor, who frowned slightly when he saw two ladies in the room.

"Introduce me!" whispered Mrs. Eager, nudging her daughter-in-law.

But, as Elsa did not move and only stood staring at the visitor, the rector's wife was constrained to introduce herself.

"I am Elsa's husband's mother!" said she.

The Baron bowed.

"I don't speak German," she added, "and if you don't speak English...?"

Another bow was the sole reply.

"You don't? Ah, then, I needn't apologise for leaving you. I was just going anyhow, and I'm sure you must have a great deal to talk of, in which I could not share."

So saying, she moved towards the door, and the Baron ran forward to open it for her.

"My mother, do not leave me!" gasped Elsa in a tense whisper, throwing out her arms.

But the appeal was unheard. Her arms fell to her side; the door closed on Mrs. Eager; Elsa was alone with the Baron von Wolfenheim.

V.

THOSE who have visited the Schloss Wolfenheim, may have noticed among the portraits on the walls of the Rittersaal, a painting of a man whose dark complexion, studious aspect, and French trim of hair and beard, seemed out of place among the florid, amply bearded, Teutonic warriors who were his forbears. The picture is that of Gunther von Wolfenheim, eleventh and last baron of the name, and he it was who now confronted Elsa in the sitting-room of Purlstone cottage, in the English sea-side town of Swangate.

His mother had been an Italian, and it was from her, no doubt, that he had inherited his swarthinness of complexion, and haply also that taste for the study of the recondite, which made him so much a man of mystery.

The southern blood ran to passion and superstition, and the German strain to metaphysics and philosophy. As far as so strange a character may be gauged from the indications furnished by this present history the Baron was a blend of the two.

Passion spoke from his dark eye, and studiousness

from his lofty forehead, while the strange, sloping ears, with their thin, barely perceptible lobes and angular, almost pointed shells, indicated both religion and combativeness. Like the Ritter von Geroldseck, the Baron was a bundle of contrasts.

The picture at the Castle represents him at the age of thirty, but when he came to Swangate, his age was probably nearer fifty than forty. His eyes had not lost their liquid brightness, but round them was a mesh of minute wrinkles; his forehead seemed higher than ever, by reason of the baldness of the crown of the head, and his beard was streaked with grey.

Elsa, nervously rigid at her full height, her face pale but impassive, save for a slight twitching of the lips, stood in the window recess, resting one hand on Raymond's writing table.

"*Wunderschön!*" murmured the Baron, as he gazed at her.

"What do you want with me?" asked Elsa in German.

"*You!*" repeated the Baron. "Formerly thou saidst *thou!*"

"I was not a wife, then!"

"Nor art thou one now?"

"How?"

"A wife belongs to her husband, but thou dost not belong to thy husband. The Englishman does not possess thee, for, as the admirable Goethe says, no one can possess what one does not understand."

Elsa shivered. The Baron's quotation seemed a crystallization of her own previous thought.

"But come, Elsa, didst thou not expect me?"

"I dreaded thee!"

"*Thee!* That is well! Old habit prevails! However it is better even to be feared than to be ignored."

"How did you discover...."

"Discover thy dwelling-place?—That was simple enough, as simple as the boy who took thee away from thy home! I went to the inn at Kreuzdorf, asked the Hãnschen for the visitors' book, and there was the name, Raymond Eager; profession, author; dwelling-place, Swangate, England. Swangate is not a large place, and I had no difficulty in finding out the house of Mr. Raymond Eager. I did not hurry. Why should I? The evil was done, and I had to think how best to remedy it. Besides, in spite of thy fear of me, I am thy friend, Elsa, and I had no wish to trouble thee. Thou wert living in a dream, and I waited till thou shouldst awake, Once more, to quote the admirable Goethe, it is a necessity of nature that a man, and also a woman, should occasionally be drugged and have their senses deadened without falling asleep. Thou hadst taken the opiate of passion, and its effects had to wear off, before one could administer the tonic of truth. That is the philosophical side of the matter. It does not appeal to a man, who is not content with pure experience."

"I do not understand," said Elsa. "What wouldst thou?"

"To act as thy friend, Elsa, to possess thee, as I alone understand thee. What sort of life is this for thee, here in this sleepy English village, where the senses of the people are deadened by beef and ale, tied to a fool of a boy, who has seen himself in a glass, and, instead of forgetting what manner of man he is, can think of nothing else?"

Elsa's eyes flashed, but the Baron smiled and waved his hand.

"I do not abuse him," said he. "No one can help their nature. The calf of such a milch-cow as that woman whom I bowed out of the door...."

"My mother!"

"Thy mother? *That!* Ach, Elsa, if thou hadst seen thy mother, thou wouldst not so abuse the word. Thy mother was a child of nature, as thou art. Her face spoke of rustling trees and bright streams, not of dough and gross English ale. As well compare the noble hound Teufel to the fat, woolly, wheezing dog at the Rectory as...."

"Hast thou been to the Rectory?"

"I do not need to go to places to learn what is to be seen there. He who has the Master Key, knows all he wishes to know. Thou also mayst know all that thy heart can conceive. Had I not yielded to thy father because of thy tender youth, thou wouldst have known long before this. Dost thou remember when I asked thee if thou wert willing to see wonderful things and learn wonderful secrets?"

"I was not willing then, and I am not willing now!" said Elsa firmly.

"And wouldst thou remain here, when thou mayst travel over the wide world—and even beyond the world and beyond the material universe? Thou hast the gypsy taint in thy blood. Thou hast the wanderfever in thy heart! On thy soul is the mark of those who wish to see and learn new things!"

"Here is my home!"

"What for a home? Because thou art petted when the fancy takes thy keeper, and given a piece of sugar like a canary bird in a cage? I tell thee, Elsa, I will take thee and show thee the King of the World!"

"The king of my world is my love! I wish for no other."

"Love! That kind of love, my Elsa, is like a sugar pig given to babies to suck! Love is strong meat, not a bonbon!"

"My husband is a good man, and thou art a bad one! Thou didst try to teach me that goodness was but the absence of the strength of evil, and that evil was the only positive power."

"I am glad thou rememberest my lessons!"

"I remember them to learn how false they were! There is something greater than evil and mystery. I do not know what it is. I am only a blind child crying for light. But I love my husband. He is good, and I will follow him till I see and know the truth!"

"Poor Elsa!"

"I do not need thy pity!"

"So thou sayest now, but very soon thou wilt think differently."

"Nothing can shake my trust in my dear one!"

"Then, thou art not willing to go with me?"

"No! I am not willing!"

"Not if thy father..."

"My husband is before my father. I *chose* my husband."

"And I, thy old friend..."

"Thou! Thou hast no influence, *here* at least, and thy opinions carry no weight. My husband has said so."

"Ach! So? Then we will see! Follow thy husband, and see where thou wilt arrive. Go after him now, and tell him I have been here, and learn his goodness. Ach! What is it the author of the Fiery Dragon says?—To learn the goodness of man is a lesson in the paramount force of evil!"

Elsa shuddered slightly at the sinister words, but pointed imperiously to the door, saying, "Go, if thou dost not wish to be beaten. Here, in England, if a man insults another's wife, there is no duel as in Germany, but the husband takes a whip and flogs him, to teach him manners."

The Baron smiled.

"I go," said he. "It is merely a question of time. A day will come when thou shalt be willing, and more than willing. When the opiate has worked off, thy husband himself will open thine eyes to the truth."

He left the room, and, as soon as he was out of sight of the house, Elsa hurried upstairs to put on her hat and mantle in order to go in search of Raymond.

VI.

ROCKS above, rocks below, rocks scattered about in titanic profusion; dry, brown rocks, basking in the sun, and feeling warm to the hand; glistening, dark rocks, washed for ever by the endless waves; the musical sea-wind singing of travel and distant lands to youthful ears; the homeless seethe of the surges calling to mind the transitoriness of life's most ecstatic moments.

Such is the impression produced by one's first visit to the famous Purlstone Caves, in the face of the cliffs, some two miles west of Swangate. They are reached by a sloping tunnel from the road above, the way being dark to eyes which enter the obscurity suddenly from the sunlight of the upper world, and the ground underfoot steep and often slippery. But once on the rock-strewn ledge, upon which most of the caves open, what a revelation of the grandeur of space meets the eye!—such a vast expanse of translucent sea and sky, that it almost seems as if the view-point were an outpost of infinity.

The proprietor of the show-place has sought to point the moral of the scene by Shakespearian and

other inscriptions, carved on the rocky tablets of the cliff, but how trivial the ordered lines of even the great Elizabethan before the untrammelled epic of rock, wave and cloud!

"The metre and rhythm of nature are independent of scansion!"

This was the remark made by Raymond, with whom the caves were a favourite resort, as a kind of stimulus to imaginative composition. The person to whom he hazarded the observation was Antonia Carew, who also held the place in affection, partly from early associations, but more from her love for its wildness.

They stood for a few moments, overlooking a deep cleft, in the narrow depths of which the breaking billows sounded loud and hollow.

"Why should what is terrible be so fascinating?" asked Antonia.

"Merely from contrast with the commonplace, I suppose. But surely you are not fascinated by the terrible?"

"Oh, yes! I am though. *You* ought to know that, Ray! I give anything for sensations. One gets so tired of living in a monotonous, narrow little place like Swangate, and up in London, it is just as bad. To go through the average people one meets, is merely like looking over a book of patterns. I often feel a wild desire to jump into a train, and let it take me anywhere, as long it is to something new,—even a smash up. I envy men, because they have the safety-valve of going wherever they like.

Poor women have to stop at home, however restless they feel."

"One gets tired of travel!" observed Raymond offhandedly.

"Did you?"

"I? Oh, well, you see it's different. I went abroad with an object...."

"You mean to get married?"

"No! To get raw material for my play, or rather to give a fillip to my imagination."

"And you gained both objects."

"I gained what was not my object, originally, I mean, and the other—well, that remains to be seen."

"It will be seen! How is the work getting on?"

"Not so fast as I like. There are so many little things to interrupt one, and once I'm off the rails, so to say, it's very hard to get on again."

"What sort of things!"

"Oh! Domestic. You see Elsa is not yet accustomed to English household ways, and has to appeal to me every time she wants a thing done."

"You can't complain of that, Ray, but, speaking impersonally, don't you think it's a mistake for a man with any particular work in hand, especially literary work, to get married?"

"Perhaps it is, unless his wife can save him the bother of domestic worries, or unless she is able to help him with his work."

"Elsa may be able to do so in time!"

"I hope so, at all events. But still, of course,

my case is different to other men's, just as Elsa's is different to that of other women."

"Hers is, but yours needn't have been!"

"N....no! Not if I hadn't gone to Germany. But I did go, and...."

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't put on that air of virtuous resignation! She is a wife to be proud of, and you always used to say you despised conventional people."

"Did I? Still, one must follow the fashions to a certain extent, and I wish Elsa got on a little better with people here."

"They are afraid of her, I fancy, Ray!"

"Afraid!"

"Yes! She is so downright. She cuts through anything like sham or pretence, like a knife, and yet as simply as a child cutting cake. Your mother would like to make friends with her, but she says some of her ideas on religious matters are quite too dreadful for a clergyman's family. She is extraordinarily superstitious, but quite irreligious. Was she brought up a Roman Catholic?"

"Her father was, but he has given it up."

"Then what did he teach her?"

"Some extraordinary mysticism of his own, about nature and I don't know what."

"But who is that Baron she sometimes quotes? Your rival?"

"My rival? Heaven forbid!"

"Why so emphatic? Is he an enemy of yours?"

"I've never set eyes on the man? He is a large

property-owner over there, who used to take an interest in Elsa, when she was a child. That's all!"

"Oh! An old man?"

"Middle-aged. But don't talk about him. I heard quite enough of him in Germany. It's hard I can't escape him even here."

"He seems to have had a great influence, and to have taught Elsa some most extraordinary things."

"He is a thoroughly bad man!" burst out Raymond.

"Really! And yet your wife...."

"Don't speak of it. She didn't know what he was! She was only a child; she knew nothing of the world, and her father...."

"Go on! I am interested, Ray! I'm sure there's some mystery, you get so excited about it."

"I'm not excited, only I detest the mere mention of the man's name! Thank goodness, he has passed out of my life, and out of Elsa's now! It was chiefly to save her from his influence, that I married her so abruptly."

"You mean you were quixotic...."

"No! no! I would have married her in any case, probably, but there were reasons why haste was imperative, and, as I say, that man was one of the reasons."

"But how could he have an influence over Elsa, if she cared for you? If I cared for any man, no one else should ever influence me!"

"You are different...."

"I don't suppose I am more faithful than she is! How could she let any other man influence her but you? And especially if he were a bad man, as you say, why...."

"Oh, do be quiet about it, Tony!" exclaimed Raymond. "I can't explain the thing, however curious you may be! I don't understand it myself. All I know is that the Baron von Wolfenheim is an evil influence. Is he not influencing even us now, hundreds of miles away?—Making me lose my temper, and making you curious, like Eve was before you, for a knowledge of good and evil."

"My dear Ray! What *do* you mean? He must indeed be a fearful man, if the mere mention of his name excites you like this. As for me, you must know that to put a woman off only increases her curiosity."

"Ask my wife, then! Perhaps she may tell you! I wish with all my heart that you or some other sensible girl would make friends with her, to counteract all the trash she learned in Germany, —evil principles, and nature, and conflicts, and all the rest!"

"Don't, Ray! You frighten me! To hear you talk, one would think Elsa was a sort of witch or Undine, or something. As it is, some people think she is not quite canny, as the Scotch say. I'm sure that dog of hers isn't. Whenever I see her out with the creature, I think of a good spirit holding a demon in leash."

"Consider the dog as the personification of the Baron von Wolfenheim and you'll be about right, only in that case, the dog would be leading instead of being led."

"Ray! You're not yourself. Never in my life, have I heard you talk so bitterly. If you want me to make friends with Elsa, or even to remain your friend, that is not the best way to do it. You only frighten me!"

"I'm very sorry, Tony! I can't help it. But there is an evil influence, at work somehow, somewhere. Elsa is all that is beautiful and sweet, I know, but . . . Well! I can't explain it. I suppose I feel annoyed, because she doesn't get on with people, as well as I had hoped. Then I detest that dog. It was given her by that man, and when he is alluded to, it always upsets me. Mysteries are all very well, but to have a sort of fog spirit hovering around, which eludes you at every turn, is discomposing, to say the least. When I'm discomposed, I can't work, and when I can't work, I'm cross. I came out here to-day merely to try and get into a more equable frame of mind, in order to be able to write. It was a pity you met me; if you hadn't, I would not have inflicted my mood on you!"

"Don't say that, Ray! I'm only sorry for you, and wish I could help you—and Elsa!"

She turned towards him as she spoke and impulsively held out her hand, which he as impulsively seized in his own.

"Try and make friends with her, Tony; won't

you, for old sake's sake! I wish you would, if only because I feel I am sometimes too harsh with the poor girl. I forget she is so young and ignorant, and a stranger in a foreign land. I forget...."

Suddenly, instinctively, Raymond dropped Antonia's hand. The girl intuitively turned her head.

Under the arch of the tunneled way leading from the cliff above, stood Elsa, regarding them both with the strange, intense widening of the eye, which Raymond had first noticed at the Försthaus.

"Have you hurt yourself?" asked Antonia, recovering her presence of mind. "That path is so dark and slippery!"

"Yes! I am hurt!" said Elsa gravely, and she turned round and began slowly to return by the way she had come.

"Elsa! Elsa!" shouted Raymond. "Don't be foolish! Come here! I want you to make friends with Tony!"

"Go after her, Ray!" said Antonia. "And *don't come back!*"

Raymond sped into the tunnel, and Antonia looked out to sea and sighed.

VII.

RAYMOND made the mistake of trying to justify himself by words when he should have relied solely upon acts.

All the way from the caves to the cottage, he explained and pleaded and urged, quite forgetting that excuses are the smoke which prove the existence of the fault.

"I only took her hand as a friend!" was the burthen of his defence.

"Friends may take hands," said Elsa quietly, "but they do not drop them suddenly."

That was the only speech on her part which Raymond could construe into a reproach, but her very quietude alarmed and annoyed him the more, and he ended by growing angry and considering that he was the aggrieved party.

Elsa had prepared a dainty lunch to tempt his appetite, but he would have none of it.

"I shall go down to the Rectory to lunch," said he, when they reached home. Then, suddenly changing his mind, with the unreason of an indignant man, he added: "No, I won't! I'll go up to Jermyn

Brand's, and look in on the mater on my way back."

Elsa did not seek to detain him, and he pelted off up hill to the artist's house.

Brand, who affected French habits of diet, acquired during his long residence in Paris, was having *déjeuner* in his studio when Raymond arrived.

"Another place for Monsieur," said the artist to his French housekeeper and cook. Then, turning to Eager, he added, "What's the trouble, Ray? A lover's quarrel for the pleasure of making it up again? 'O, we fell out, my wife and I,' etcetera?"

"Don't play the clown, Jermyn!" was the moody reply.

"No ambition! Joints not flexible enough! But seriously, what's amiss? You look distraught."

"And so I am! It's really very hard upon a fellow, when he's trying to do all he can for his wife, to be suspected by her of philandering with another girl."

"Antonia Carew?"

"Yes! I met Tony at the caves and we were talking of Elsa, and I asked Tony to try and make friends with her. She promised she would, and, in some idiotic impulse or another, I took her hand to thank her, and at that very moment, Elsa appears, looks at us reproachfully and walks away."

"Didn't you explain?"

"Of course I did, but she only remarked that friends might take hands but they didn't drop them suddenly, when a third person appeared!"

"Did you drop Tony's hand, then?"

"Naturally. It was instinctive!"

"H'm! I thought you said when I warned you against being too friendly with Tony Carew, that your wife didn't know what jealousy was."

"Nor did she! But I suppose she does now!"

"It looks like it. She would hardly be a woman else."

"But the worst of it is, I got angry with her, and you can't think how that hurts me. I can't help being angry, and yet I love her so, that I'm more angry with myself for being angry, than I am with her for making me angry. And only this morning too, I was correcting her and telling her to speak English, and to try and humour people's foibles more and make friends with the mater. And she was so good and sweet over it, and we parted such friends when I went out,—and now...! Oh! It's simply beastly!"

"My dear boy," said Jermyn gravely. "In trying to make your wife popular here, you are attempting the one impossible thing."

"What's that?"

"To serve two masters!"

"How?"

"By endeavouring to make your love for your wife fit in with your social ambitions. If you had married another woman, Antonia Carew, for instance, the two things might have harmonised. But you have married unusually, and when the usual and the unusual come into conflict, the unusual generally goes to the wall."

"Yes! I'm sure I wish I had never brought her to Swangate, but it was at your advice I did so."

"I only advised you to introduce your wife to your people, not to come and live here. That was a mistake."

"But what was I to do? I couldn't take her to London. I thought she would get gradually initiated to English social life down here and . . . But what's the good of talking about it? Hang this sleepy, old, stick-in-the-mud place! Hang everything!"

"Not so fast, Ray! Not so fast! You are too impatient, and think because you wish a thing done, it ought to be done immediately. I expect your marriage was largely due to your impatience, and now, because it isn't turning out quite as smoothly as you expected, you are annoyed, and are inclined to chuck the whole thing up! But don't do that, boy, don't do that! You've never made the experiment of living in constant companionship with anyone before, or you would know that you must allow time for the angularities to rub off, and make allowance for mutual idiosyncracies, which, in your case, are more marked than in ordinary cases."

"Yes! Yes! I know all that. I know I'm impatient and intolerant, but just as I was really trying to make allowances, you know, it is rough on me for this to happen, isn't it, now?"

"Why don't you alter the point of view, Ray, and instead of talking of yourself making allowances for your wife, think of your wife making allowances for you? We talk of the necessity of being tolerant

of others, but we incline to forget that, in nine cases out of ten, it is we ourselves who stand in need of tolerance from others."

"That never occurred to me!" said Raymond, more composedly.

"Of course it didn't! It is only as a man grows older that he learns that he is not the central sun of the social system, not even a planet, often only the smallest of small asteroids,—a mere speck of cosmic dust. To continue the illustration, your wife, in my opinion, is a star of the first magnitude, but belonging to another system. You can't measure her by the rules obtaining in the Swangate system, so to say."

"I'm sure I don't want to!"

"You may not want to, but you can't help doing so. You are far too much subject to your environment, Ray. I won't say you are actually selfish, but you always want to be on the sunny side of the road, in other words, with the majority. Be more independent, boy! You were independent in your marriage; be equally so in your married life. A man marries to please himself, but, when he is married, he should live to please his wife. That is not a moral axiom, but a working rule for domestic happiness."

Raymond sat for a few minutes with his face in his hands. Then he looked up with a face like a sky clearing after rain.

"You are so wise, old Jermyn," said he, "it is a pity you haven't a wife like Elsa, yourself. I

will try to think less of myself and more of Elsa, and not to care what other people think. I know I'm selfish. I suppose it's because I've always had my own way! But what am I to do to clear up this ridiculous matter of Tony Carew? The worst of it is, Elsa was so quiet! If she had got angry, or reproached me, I shouldn't have minded, but she just cut me with her calm composure. Does she care at all, or is it that she cares all the more deeply for being so still?"

"The latter certainly! I don't think she is at all an excitable woman, quite a Serene Highness, in fact, as your father said, but she feels deeply. Will you give me leave to explain the thing, Ray? I think I can set matters straight, and she knows I'm impartial."

"Dear old fellow! I shall be so grateful if you will!"

"Then make your mind easy, and, whatever happens, remember that your wife has the greatest of all merits—she is true!"

VIII.

“THE greatest of all merits—she is true!”

These words rang in Raymond's ears, as he left the artist's house and walked down to the Rectory. He was anxious to get home to Elsa, but he felt so happy and so relieved, that he could not refrain from going in to see his mother, that she might see how bright he was. Mr. and Mrs. Carew, and their daughter were taking tea in the drawing-room, when Raymond entered.

“Ah! Here he is! You are the very man we want, Ray!” said the ex-mayor. “Tell 'me now, isn't he a thin, parchmenty complexioned man with a pointed grey beard, hair growing a bit thin on the top, and dark eyes? He wears a kind of frogged, astrakhan, Hungarian or rather Russian looking coat! Looks like an ambassador or a diplomatist, a distinguished foreigner, anyhow.”

“What? who . . . ?” began Raymond.

“How, when and where!” chimed in Mrs. Carew, laughing. “How did we meet him, when did we meet him and where did we meet him? Eh? Well, he was driving in a fly to the railway station. We

thought he must have been to call on Lady Ulverscroft . . ."

"But of whom are you speaking?"

"Of your German visitor, Ray?" said his mother. "I hope you got back in time to catch him. A man like that might be so useful to you!"

"Yes! But I tell you I haven't the last idea whom you're talking about. What German visitor?"

"Haven't you been home, then?"

"I was at home just before lunch. Not since!"

"Didn't you see him, when you went home to lunch then?"

"See whom?"

"The German baron who called on . . ."

Raymond started from his seat.

"German baron! What baron?"

"The Baron von Wolfenheim. The man whom Elsa sometimes used to quote, the man who gave her that dog, so she told me."

Antonia, who had hitherto avoided meeting Raymond's eye, looked at him curiously and pityingly. But he paid no heed either to her or to anyone else.

"The Baron von Wolfenheim!" he said slowly, in a low, constrained voice. "The Herr Baron! And has he been to see Elsa without my knowledge?"

"Yes! Am I not telling you so?" impatiently remarked his mother. "Elsa introduced him to me. What on earth is the matter with the boy? Do, for heaven's sake, sit down, and not stare like a china doll! What did you have for lunch to disagree with you?"

"I? Oh... er... I... er... lunched at Jermyn Brand's. It was his French cookery, I expect. Yes! That must have been what it was! Give me a cup of tea, will you, mother?"

"There it is, Ray, on the table at your elbow!"

"Oh, yes; of course! How stupid of me!"

"Come, my dear!" here observed Mrs. Carew to her husband. "We must really be going on now. We promised to be at the Baldfinches before five! Come, Tony!"

Antonia shot a swift glance at Raymond as she obeyed, but he sat staring into his cup of tea, as if he were practising a new kind of soothsaying. He rose mechanically to shake hands with the departing visitors, but he left his mother to go to the drawing-room door with them.

"Now, Ray!" said Mrs. Eager, turning back into the room. "What on earth is the matter with you. I hope you haven't been drinking!"

"No! I haven't come to that yet, mother. But tell me, do you mean to say you met the Baron von Wolfenheim at *my* house, here at Swangate, this morning?"

"Certainly, I did! I thought he would have waited till your return. I didn't stop, because he apparently doesn't speak English, and I felt that my presence would only embarrass him. Even if you didn't see him, surely Elsa told you all about it?"

Raymond hesitated before replying. Then he said rapidly,

"I suppose she didn't have time. I was only

at home a minute, and then I hurried off to Brand's place."

"My dear boy, I can see you're not frank with me. Who is this Baron that you should seem so disturbed about him.... and Elsa?"

"Not Elsa, mater! Not Elsa! Don't couple her name with his!"

"Your own manner is doing so far more than my words, Ray! Come, confide in your mother, dear boy. You have a wife, now, of course, but, after all, you can only have one mother, and besides, I know your character so well and can make allowances, so let me help you!"

Raymond bit his lip and walked to the window.

"It is really nothing, mater! Only a foolish idea on my part—an absurd idea, in fact! But, you see, Elsa and I had a sort of little tiff this morning, and I left the house in a temper, and... and I expect that is why she didn't tell me that the...er...the Baron had called. I didn't know he was in England."

"Ray, boy, you're still hiding something. What did you quarrel about?"

"Oh! She took offence at my being so friendly with Tony. She doesn't understand, you see, what old friends we are!"

"Still, Ray, that's only natural if Elsa loves you, as I believe she does. I should avoid giving her the slightest pretext for jealousy, if I were you."

"I love her so well, mater, that I didn't imagine she could be jealous!"

"In fact, you've taught her to expect so much that she won't be contented with less. But even so, that doesn't explain your excitement about this German baron. She was wrong not to tell you he had been. As Jermyn Brand says, it's always better to tell than to be found out. Surely the Baron wasn't an old admirer? He's quite a middle-aged man, distinguished looking, certainly, but far from handsome."

"Don't speak of him, mater! I thought he had gone out of Elsa's life, and now.... I wonder how the deuce he found out where we were."

"I suppose her father told him. She had a letter from her father this morning."

"If her father did tell him, then he has played me false!" muttered Raymond.

"What?"

"Nothing! Only that I don't think her father did tell him!"

"Why, aren't they friends?"

"Friends? Yes! Rather too much so, to my taste!"

"Then what do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know, mater! I think the devil is..."

"Ray!"

"I beg pardon, mater! I'm worried!"

"My dear boy, surely you don't suspect..."

Raymond turned round sharply.

"No, mother! I suspect nothing. Whatever Elsa's faults may be, she has the greatest of all merits. She is true!"

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Ray. But if you think so, why be so worried? It's silly to worry over trifles. I'm very sorry for you, my dear boy, but I can't help you, if you're not frank with me, and you are keeping something back, I can see. I won't go into the old question of your marriage, though it was a grief, in a way, to all of us, even though Elsa is a nice, good girl. As I say, I won't go into that again, but please don't let your marriage come between mother and son!"

"It seems to come between me and everything, my own good temper included, sometimes!" said Ray bitterly.

His mother laid a restraining hand on his coat-sleeve.

"Dear boy, tell me! There's nothing in Elsa's past life of which you are ashamed?"

"Ashamed! No! There is no woman I could be more proud of. She is my wife!"

"Then go home and tell her so, and let this little cloud blow over, Ray. The future may be all the brighter for these little storms at first. As for that Baron, if he is not a nice person to know, he can easily be avoided."

"Can he?" murmured Raymond to himself.

But he kissed his mother and went away, hoping that he had said nothing to lower her opinion of his wife. Pride as well as love demanded that he should boast his perfect belief in Elsa, for nothing could humiliate him more than to confess that he had made a mistake in a matter in which he had

pitted his own judgment against the opinion of all the world—*all* his world, at least. He was annoyed with himself for having displayed such uneasiness at the mention of the Baron's name, especially before the Carews. But he trusted to his mother to remedy that mistake by some plausible explanation, knowing that, however she might lecture him in private, she would always defend him in public.

Yet, as he went up to his house, he was confronted with the initial difficulty that he must clear himself in Elsa's eyes in regard to the Antonia Carew incident, before he could ask her for any explanation regarding the Baron von Wolfenheim.

So he completed the exclamation which he had left unfinished in his mother's presence, and muttered, "I think the devil is in the thing!"

IX.

ON the morrow, Jermyn Brand, knowing nothing of the further complication introduced by the visit of the Baron von Wolfenheim, cast about for an opportunity to achieve his mission of mediation between Raymond and Elsa.

The day happened to be Sunday, and Brand timed his walk to Purlstone Cottage so as to arrive there just after the church service. His arrival coincided with that of Mrs. Eager, who, not having seen her son or daughter-in-law at morning service, was naturally anxious to tap the domestic barometer.

"Oh, Mr. Brand!" said she. "I'm so glad you've come. I want to have a few minutes talk alone with Ray, and I was wondering how I should be able to manage it without offending his wife, for wives always rather resent their husbands having confidences with anyone but themselves, even with their own mothers. Besides, I have a particular reason for not wishing to *appear* anxious to talk to Ray alone, though I am anxious to do so. Do you understand? It is in Ray's own interests."

"I'll manage it," said the artist. "As it happens, I also want to have a word or two alone with Mrs. Raymond."

"Then we can play into each other's hands, as they say."

In pursuance of this compact, they were scarcely inside the house, when Brand suggested a walk.

"You haven't been to church, I know," said he, "but still it is the proper thing to take a walk between church time and the Sunday early dinner. It enables one to digest the spiritual manna, and is an appetiser for the grosser sustenance to follow."

Raymond, guessing his object, at once seconded the proposal, and, Mrs. Eager being equally in its favour, Elsa put on her hat and jacket, and all four left the house.

They slowly made their way up hill to the Purlstone Park Estate, an ambitious enterprise, supported by Mr. Carew, to lay out a new seaside town on the cliffs west of Swangate. The scheme, so far, had not got beyond the stage of two or three wide unfinished roads and a few boards announcing eligible sites for bungalows and villas. Nevertheless, the situation was high and bracing and the comparative aridity of the actual estate led to an oasis by the sea, where, even in winter, the blue of sky and sea was enframed in the verdure of pine trees and evergreen shrubs. The waves trailed in silver fringes on a semi-circle of high, broken cliffs, where hedges of myrtle and arbutus sheltered zigzag

paths and sloping walks; and the western arm of the bay was crowned by a building which resembled a mediæval castle but was put to more practical use as a restaurant.

A steep winding path, breaking here and there into rough flights of stone steps, led from the summit of the cliff to the beach, and, two thirds of the way down, there was an open platform of turf, surrounded by a low wall, along which ran a stone seat.

The track being too narrow for four to walk abreast, Mrs. Eager went on ahead with her son, and proceeded direct to this seat, where they were concealed from the view of Jermyn Brand and Elsa, who followed more leisurely.

"Your husband came to lunch with me, yesterday, Mrs. Raymond," said the artist.

"Yes! It pleased me for him to go. It is dull for him to have the same face opposite him day after day. Men are not like women. They need change."

"He does not think so," said Brand. "The desire for change is a token of discontent."

"He may not think so, but he feels it. I myself often feel things which I dare not think."

"I know that. But you need not—even feel them."

Elsa looked at Brand interrogatively.

"He told me about yesterday morning," continued the artist.

"But how? You have not seen him again this morning already?"

"No! He told me at lunch time yesterday."

"But did he know then already? I thought he did not hear of it, until he went to the Rectory in the afternoon. Of course, I do not know, for he said nothing to me, but..."

"We are at cross purposes, Mrs. Raymond. What do you think I am referring to?"

"To the visit of the Baron von Wolfenheim?"

"He? Has he been *here* then?—I was talking of what you saw at the caves yesterday morning... of Miss Carew!"

"Ach, that? That is nothing to me now, even though Raymond went in the afternoon to the Rectory, when she was visiting there."

"I wanted to assure you there is no ground for mistrusting Raymond. Pardon me for speaking so frankly, but I have known him since he was a boy. However, if you have already been reassured, and don't worry any longer...."

"What if I do, Herr Brand? That is nothing, for me to feel worried because Raymond likes to be with... with... his old friend. It is only because I am foolish and do not understand,—because in our forest, and afterwards, I had Raymond to myself, and find it difficult to spare him to other people, though I know it is selfish to wish to keep him to myself, when all others should share in his cleverness and companionship. No! For me to feel worried, because he talks to others who understand him better than I do,—that is nothing, for I *know* he is always true. But for him

to mistrust me! Ach! That is very, very hard."

"It would be, if he did mistrust you, but I am sure you must be mistaken in thinking he does or could do so."

"I cannot be mistaken about Raymond. Others may be, but I... never! Even though he may not speak, I feel what he thinks, and so I feel, now. He was so angry yesterday when he went to see you, that I did not tell him the Herr Baron had been, and he learned it first from his mother, who was here when the Baron came. I was about to tell him when he reached home, but I looked in his face, when I went to kiss him, and I saw that... *he knew.*"

"Even if he did, what then?" asked the artist, soothingly, grieved to see how much Elsa had been disturbed from her wonted composure.

"He thinks that I received the Baron secretly, and would not have told him if he had heard it not from other people."

"My dear Mrs. Raymond, I know the Baron is not a *persona grata* to your husband. He told me all about him! But what you imagine is impossible. Ray may be headstrong, jealous, even selfish, if you like, but he is not a fool—excuse the word! However he may distrust the Baron, he has perfect trust in you."

"Did he tell you so?"

"No, indeed! That was not necessary. His trust is too real for him to protest it. When men require to profess their trust, it generally means they want

to reassure themselves. But as for this Baron, has he left Swangate?"

"I do not know, but, in my home, we used to say he came and went like the wind in the forest trees."

"Well, anyhow, you need not fear him. I happen to know something about him, and I think my knowledge will enable me to keep him away from Swangate."

Elsa's face brightened.

"You have that power? Truly?"

Brand smiled at her eagerness.

"I hope so," he made answer. "At all events, I will try and exercise it, if necessary, for your sake . . . and Ray's."

"How can I sufficiently thank you?"

"By looking upon me as your friend."

"Ach! Indeed I do think you my very, very good friend."

In a sudden impulse of girlish sentiment, she turned to the grey, stone wall, the stones of which were bound together by creeping plants, and plucking a spray of ivy, put it to her lips, and handed it to her companion, with the remark,

"It is a sign of fidelity between friends, you know!"

Jermyn Brand smiled.

Her action was only childish sentiment, yet how pure and delicate such sentiment seemed amid the dust and turmoil of the daily round!

Scarcely had he taken the proffered token, however, when there was a sound of footsteps on the

path, and a man appeared from behind the screen of laurel bushes at the turning of the way.

Seeing a horrified look in Elsa's eyes, Jermyn Brand guessed the identity of the intruder without needing to turn his head.

X.

ELSA was standing at the top of a rough flight of stone steps. A straggling branch of laurestinus overarched her, and the dark, glossy green of the leaves harmonised with the olive green velvet in her low, wide-brimmed hat of brown straw. Her dress, of the same warm shades of brown and green, contrasted with the cold grey of the stone wall beside the path. Her slight, lithe figure stood out dark against the sunlit, sapphire sea. Far below, a silver line marked the boundary between beach and tide. High above, the spires of the fir trees tapered into the gentian blue of an autumn sky.

The Baron von Wolfenheim smiled at the picture, raised his hat and bowed with the somewhat exaggerated courtesy, due to his foreign diplomatic training.

"I thought you had left Swangate!" said Elaa coldly.

"Nay! I could not be so discourteous as to leave without seeing thy husband. I slept at the Station Hotel, and called at thy house but just now, only to find thee gone. But the servant told me rightly

that I should meet thee and thy husband, here. I have much pleasure to make his acquaintance."

So saying, the Baron bowed to Jermyn Brand.

The artist, who detested nothing so much as being made to look ridiculous, answered with some acerbity, "I have not that honour. That is Mr. Raymond Eager, coming up from the shore with his mother."

"Ach! So? I thought..."

The Baron glanced at the ivy which Brand had placed in the button-hole of his coat.

"This is the friend of my husband, Herr Jermyn Brand," said Elsa hurriedly.

The Baron indulged in a smile, more hateful than any frown could have been—the smile with which evil greets evil.

"Then my pleasure is doubled," said he. "The vrendt of the husband becomes the vrendt of the wife. I am honoured to make your acquaintance, Herr Brand. Your name is not unknown in Germany. If I do not make a mistake, it was a picture by the brush of Herr Brand that won a gold medal at Munich, some years ago. Everyone knows it now, it has been engraved so often. The picture '*Wohin?*'—a young maiden standing by the rushing stream. Ach! It was a *welt-bild*, a world picture, expressing what everyone has to ask,—'Whither?' And to me it spoke with treble force, because the stream was the Sternbach! Thou knowest that, Elsa?"

"I know the Wolfsbach better!"

"Ach! Yes!—Perhaps! It was there that thou

thyself asked that world-question, 'wohin?', was it not?—But here already come thy husband and the lady I met at thy house yesterday."

The Baron went forward with outstretched hand to greet Mrs. Eager, who responded with a bow.

Nothing abashed, Von Wolfenheim turned to Raymond.

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, sir. I waited in Swangate for no other purpose, after I had the misfortune not to find you yesterday. What a beautiful spot you have chosen for your home! Even though it is the winter, the Riviera could not be more beautiful. I was just about to tell Herr Brand that he could not wish for a better subject to paint, than your wife standing overlooking yonder blue sea, like a Roman maiden watching the *Mittelmeer*—the Medit-dit-dit... how goes it in English?"

"Mediterranean?" said Mrs. Eager.

"I thank you! Like a Roman maiden awaiting her lover, with ivy in her hand as a symbol of fidelity."

"But the ivy is in Mr. Brand's coat!" said the vicar's wife.

Raymond glanced—and winced.

"Ach! Yes! It is an artist's fantasy, no doubt. Art is the only faithful mistress, is she not, Herr Brand?"

One drop of evil suggestion had poisoned the sweetness of an innocent action.

Elsa blushed and Jermyn frowned.

Raymond, speaking almost hysterically, with the

bitterness of the fanatic who burns himself in the fire of his own kindling, said "Won't you come back to lunch with us, Baron?"

Elsa looked at her husband in surprise and reproach. Amazement was also seen on the faces of Mrs. Eager and Jermyn Brand.

But Raymond smiled, as if he were amused at their discomfiture.

A spirit of malicious contrariness seemed to have entered his heart.

"I shall have much pleasure," said the Baron.

"And you too, Jermyn?" asked Raymond.

Brand hesitated.

"It will please me, if you come!" said Elsa, with a beseeching look, which both the Baron and her husband noticed, and both misinterpreted.

"I will come then!" answered the artist gravely.

"It's not a funeral feast!" remarked Raymond.

"Even so, *obiit annus, abiit onus*, as the wonderful Schopenhauer quoted in his diary," said the Baron laughing.

"The year sometimes brings more burdens than it removes," replied Brand, "and for all we know, death may do the same, for some people."

"For goodness' sake, don't mention such gloomy subjects!" objected the rector's wife. "What on earth is the matter with you all?"

"The de'il kens, as the Scotch say, mother! 'When the de'il comes into Kirk, e'en the saints begin to curse,' a Highland sawney used to say at Caius, and I believe it's true."

"Ray! I'm ashamed of such levity, on a Sunday too. Besides . . . Elsa . . . ! What an example!"

"Oh, Elsa doesn't need my example. Jermyn is a much better guide for her!"

"He certainly is, Ray, if you're going on like this! Come, Elsa, we'll go on together. And you too, Mr. Brand, come and escort us. There are too many of us to walk abreast. I had no idea you spoke English so well, Baron."

"I would not insult a country by visiting it without knowing the language, madame. Besides, England is the land of Shakespeare, and to us Germans, Shakespeare is a greater prophet than Goethe.— 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of' . . . eh? Ach! Shakespeare was my Bible once. Macbeth and his witches, Faust on the Brocken! They are the conceptions of genius, who had found the Master Key!"

Elsa shuddered and began to walk slowly on.

Mrs. Eager smiled and joined her, with Jermyn Brand.

"What is this Master Key?" asked Raymond, as he followed with the Baron. "I saw a book of that name in the Schloss Wolfenheim, when I was there, but from the sayings of yours which my wife has quoted to me, it would seem to be more than a mere title."

"My goodt vrendt!" said the Baron, taking his arm. "It is a symbol for world-power."

"So the word implies! But what power?"

"The power of discerning evil beneath the most

fair-looking exteriors. It is a sixth sense, like the scent of a dog. Everyone has it, but not all can use it. It needs developing, and the best and perhaps the only means of development is pure experience."

"Of what?"

"Of fellow men. To know men.... and women... is to learn the power of evil. Evil is positive, good mere negative. That is why good people are usually so flat and uninteresting. That is why the greatest of men have always had power for evil,—Julius Cæsar, Napoleon, even the men you call saints, such as Augustine. Of women, the name is legion, Eve, Mary of Magdala, Catherine of Medicis, Catherine of Russia, Lucrezia Borgia.... nearly every woman whose name is preserved by history is remembered because of her power for evil."

The speech seemed to excite Raymond.

"I will never believe Elsa is evil!" he exclaimed.

"She is not yet a matter of history," said the Baron smiling. "But I have known her all her life, and I know her nature is not an ordinary nature. Her mother was a gypsy out of Hungary, and that race has fire in the blood. Children till they are roused by love or hate, but then...."

"What?"

"I will not say. The word may not have the same meaning in your ears as it has in mine. But as for Elsa, if I may advise you, my goodt

vrendt, do not neglect her and, above all, never make her jealous of another woman."

Raymond winced.

"Why, what would she do?"

"I do not know what Elsa would do. If she were a wild gypsy, she might stab you with a dagger."

"And if a tame gypsy, so to say?"

"Ach! How do I know? I knew one once, and the man flirted, as you call it, and she..."

"Well! What did she do?" asked Raymond breathlessly.

"She stabbed his honour. He discovered it by some silly token such as a ribbon, a flower, or a leaf, which she had given her lover. And the lover was his closest, most trusted friend."

"What happened then?"

"Ach! Out there, there is only one way of settling such things. It is not as here, where honour is paid for with money damages. There it is paid for with blood. But this of course is an extreme case. It is no business of yours or of Elsa. But, before I left Kreuzdorf, Elsa's father told me he was anxious how his daughter should find herself among strangers. But I said truly that her husband was all she desired."

Raymond did not reply, but as they joined the others near the cottage, he glanced moodily at the ivy-leaf in the lappel of Jermyn Brand's coat, and thought of the alacrity with which the artist had offered to mediate between husband and wife.

XI.

RAYMOND EAGER sat that evening in Swangate parish church.

After a futile effort to out-stay each other, Jermyn Brand and the Baron von Wolfenheim had left Purlstone Cottage simultaneously. Raymond had accompanied them, and, when Brand turned off up the hill towards home, had gone on with the Baron along the shore to the Station Hotel.

Returning, he had heard the bells ringing for Evensong, and, being in no mood to hurry home, had joined his mother in the Rectory pew. She looked very pleased to see him, and he, on his part found it soothing to sit where he had sat as a boy and join in the simple service, which, for him, was inextricably interwoven with the fibres of memory.

The mere bodily proximity of his mother was balm to his fevered spirit, and the pleasant if monotonous voice of his father intoning the prayers, acted as an antidote to the corrosive, if worldly-wise, utterances, which he had been hearing from the lips of the Baron von Wolfenheim. Raymond was not a religious man, but there is no man, how-

ever sceptical, as long as he be not vicious, who is case-hardened against the sensuous impressiveness of the faith endeared to him by the earliest associations. The hallowing force of memory is greater than that of many an alleged conviction. So Raymond for a while, stood, sat, or knelt, with a sense of being lulled to contentment, which he was too apprehensive of losing, to disturb by active thought.

But there is a content which is the breeder of discontent.

Such was Raymond's. He was contented, merely because he had revived the past for a few fleeting moments, and found it pleasanter than the present.

This little church held all that he had been accustomed to, all that he had known and had grown to regard with the calm, unemotional affection born of habit.

Here at hand, his homely, but comely mother; yonder, in the chancel, his surpliced father speaking in refined measured tone of the hopes that come naturally to the well-ordered life; all around, familiar faces, from the jolly, rubicund face of the vergier, to the dark beauty of Antonia Carew, her bright face now wearing a demure look of devotion which was indescribably arch and captivating. How neat and cosy she looked in her dark, close fitting winter dress! How homely the Gothic interior appeared in the gas-light, reflected so mellowly by the oaken pews and the great, brass eagle. How nice and comfortable it all looked! Nice and com-

fortable! Those were finger-post epithets, pointing to that innate love of the customary and the usual, which, as Jermyn Brand had long before pointed out, underlay all Raymond's professed disregard of convention and his craving for the unusual. Swiftly, inevitably came the converse of this picture of British, respectable, unemotional, Sabbath comfort—the Försthaus on the Tannenberg, the dog Teufel, the subtle influence of the Baron von Wolfenheim, the wild night drive through the forest, the tall, pale-haired maiden who had seemed the embodiment of the forest romance.

That almost seemed a dream now, but Raymond knew that it was no dream. Rather was it the actual living present, and the scene before him merely the pale shadow of a past, which he might have made a present, but had not.

For the first time consciously, he was inclined to rail at Destiny, and to think how much smoother would have been his path, if he had married and settled down among his own people.

He glanced at Antonia. She looked nice enough for any man, and he knew her real worth.

But yet... compare her with Elsa,—Elsa, the stately yet childlike, the angelic, but tender and wistful maiden, whom he had made his own, as it were, by right of capture.

No! He could not surrender Elsa, even in thought, could not subordinate her claims to those of any living woman.

He might find a score of Antonias in the world,

but Elsa was unique. Yet he had a vague intuition that an Antonia would have been better suited to him. The possession of an Elsa entailed such constant effort to keep up to the standard which he had taught her to expect of him. He could never 'stand at ease'!

Now, too, he had the fear of being robbed, for the ownership of a pearl of price is attended by the penalty attached to all possessions of great value.

The Baron's innuendoes, also, stuck to him like barbed arrows. Raymond would rather that the sinister nobleman himself had given ground for all his former jealousy, than that he should even suspect that any meaning could lurk in the spray of ivy which he had seen in Jermyn Brand's coat.

He felt like a man with a jewel which he cannot wear himself with ease, yet dare not trust out of his care, for fear of it being stolen. It would add insult to injury, were the thief a man whom the trinket would become.

Thus the solemn service which commenced by being an anodyne, ended by becoming an irritant, from the mere, inevitable evolution of thought.

But the parting hymn came at last, the 'Eternal Father, strong to save', which was a favourite at Swagate owing to the proximity of the sea.

There was the usual gathering of friends to exchange greetings at the door, and, by some chance, Raymond found himself next to Antonia.

"I've been so anxious to get a word alone with you, Ray," she whispered. "I do hope you managed

to explain that business of the other day to your wife. I would have been to see her, only I didn't like to, until I knew for certain that she understood, you see. I really want to make friends with her, for her own sake, as well as yours."

It was an unhappy reference in Raymond's then mood.

"She wouldn't hear a word!" he blurted out.

"What, not even when you explained...."

"She wouldn't listen to my explanation."

"But surely afterwards, when you were both calmer?.... Oh! I shall be sorry if I...."

"No! It was not you.... not you alone, I mean. We had another difference afterwards about this Baron who has turned up."

"What! The man you abused so dreadfully?"

"Yes! I only knew him by hearsay, then. He doesn't seem a bad sort when one meets him. Besides, I want to investigate him, as a queer human specimen."

"Then how...."

"You mean how did Elsa give me such a bad impression of him. Oh! That's easily explained. You see, the people out there are as superstitious as they can be, and a man has only got to wear a cloak and look mysterious, to make them think he is in league with the Devil. The Baron was only laughing with me, just now, over the fear he inspires, just because he dabbled a little in chemistry, and they thought it was the Black Art!"

"But still, Ray, after all you said about him and...."

"Yes! Yes! I know! But Elsa must have been a little goose. She was only a child then, and some little girls are so silly and take such romantic exaggerated views."

"Is this the Baron's own explanation?"

"Partly, yes!"

"Well, I shouldn't trust him much, if I were you!"

"No fear of that! I think I can manage him pretty well, now I know what I have to tackle. Not but what he is shrewd, very shrewd! Quite mordant, some of his remarks are, but, still, that is stimulating. He has given me several really smart bits of dialogue to stick in my play."

"Oh, don't make it biting and sarcastic, Ray!"

"Sarcasm goes down in these days, though, and, as he says, knowledge of life begets sarcasm. Irony is the proof of experience."

"Only of crude or evil experience! I'm sure of that, Ray, although I've seen so little. But I do wish you would make matters smooth with Elsa, and I'm afraid the arrival of this baron on the scene won't help to mend matters."

"Oh, yes, it will, though. He has known her longer than I have and seems to have learned her character by heart. As he says, people must be influenced on their weak side."

"I shouldn't trust him, Ray, for all that. He must be bad to think so meanly of people."

"Don't fear, Tony. When one expects to meet an

enemy, one is armed beforehand. It is the false friends who are not to be trusted."

"You are bitter! What do you mean?"

But no answer came, further confidential talk being ended by the intervention of Mrs. Eager, who was not quite free from maternal fears in regard to too cordial a renewal of the old friendship between her younger son and Antonia Carew. Moreover, she had a wife's fellow-feeling for another wife, though the latter did happen to be her daughter-in-law.

So Raymond perforce walked slowly home, quite unconscious that Elsa, weary and lonely on account of his prolonged absence, and hearing from her omniscient servant that the 'measter had gone to church,' had come out to meet him, but had returned home alone, on seeing the interview in the porch.

Raymond, finding her unapproachable, attributed her mood to fatigue or anger with him, perhaps both, and sat down at his table to write, seeing which, she retired upstairs to her bedroom.

XII.

ON the afternoon of the Saturday following the Sunday on which the Baron von Wolfenheim made himself known to Raymond Eager, Elsa sat alone in the sitting-room at Purlstone Cottage. The dog Teufel, lay at her feet.

It had been a week of rain and wind, but on this afternoon there was a brief interlude of brightness, and Elsa looked longingly out of the window, as if she wished that she were outside, enjoying the brisk breeze, betokened by the swiftly moving fragments of cloud with which the sky was alive, and by the slanting lines of the showers sweeping over the more distant reaches of the channel. The sea inshore was striped like a water-snake, and across the bay, the cliffs of Ballard Point shone white against the dusky clouds on the northern horizon. It was an hour of colour, motion and atmospheric life, when all indoor trappings of carpet, curtain and chintz looked dingy and faded.

Suddenly the hound pricked his ears.

"What ails thee? Is it thy master?" asked Elsa. Teufel slowly wagged his tail.

The latch of the garden gate clicked, and Elsa saw Jermyn Brand coming up to the door.

She went to meet him on the threshold.

"Why have we not seen you for so long a time?"

"I have been up to London and only got back last night. I hardly expected to find anyone indoors here, though. I thought you would all be taking advantage of this brief spell of fine weather."

"Nay! not I, Herr I mean Mr. Brand! You forget it is my 'at home' day, when Raymond said I should stay in the house to receive visitors, in order to prepare myself for the time when we shall go to London. I do not receive many visitors, here, at Swangate, it is true, except yourself and Raymond's mother, and once the Carews, though I do not think they will come more, after But Raymond said I was to stay in!"

"But still on a day like this, it is a hardship!"

"A hard ship?"

"*One* word, not two, I mean, Mrs. Raymond! Hard to bear, severe!"

"Ach! Pardon me! It is my bad English! Yes! How dearly I would love now to be walking by the sea, out in the open air, but it is better to obey than to enjoy, my father once told me, and so I sit and wait for my visitors. But you are a visitor, so come in, and I must give you tea and talk about the weather. Is that not the way to receive visitors?"

The artist smiled, but, as she turned to lead the way in, frowned and muttered something below his breath.

"If you please? I did not hear!" said Elsa, as they entered the sitting-room.

"Oh! I was only saying it was really a shame for visitors to keep you in!"

"Ach! Yes! Perhaps! But you are a friend as well as a visitor. And besides, I must not always have so great a desire to go out. It is like a gypsy. So Raymond has said, since the Herr Baron came. And then in London, I shall not be able to go out, so I must get accustomed to being a prisoner."

"Is the Baron still here?"

"Yes! He is out with Raymond, at this moment. But see how strange! The Teufel knows you are a friend. He licks your hand! And when you came, I asked him if his master came, and he wagged his tail. He is never so friendly with Raymond. He is changing his character here in England. He is not friendly even with the Herr Baron any more!"

"Perhaps his instinct perceives an enemy in the man!"

"Think you so? The Baron told me when he gave me the dog, he had the gift of distinguishing between friend and foe, and of seeing evil, even when it was hidden. But why should he be so doubtful with Raymond? He was becoming friendly to him in Germany, and now Ach! It is all so very strange! Where the Herr Baron comes, at once comes mystery, and a feeling that one is the sport of hidden powers. Truly, I begin to believe that he has a master key to unlock men's minds and place

thoughts there, which were never there before."

"I don't understand how he comes to be still at Swangate," said Brand. "Still less how Raymond seems so friendly with him, unless he assumes an air of friendship to disarm suspicion of his real dislike and distrust."

"No! I do not think so! You see, Raymond never had seen the Herr Baron before. He had only heard of him, and he disliked him because he feared his influence over me. But the Baron does not speak much to me, since he has seen Raymond. And then, you know, the Herr Baron is a very clever man and Raymond ought always to talk with clever people, he is so clever himself. He says the Baron has a wonderful knowledge of people and has helped him to many new touches of character in his play. They have sat up late several nights, writing and composing together. And Raymond has taken him to the Carews, who were really very much pleased to have a nobleman to see them, and the Baron greatly praised Miss Carew and said she was very clever. Ach! It is a wonderful thing, to be clever. It makes all people love one!"

"Fear, you mean!" said Brand. "But, anyhow, it is better to be good!"

"Think you so? Perhaps you are right. But I do not know what goodness is."

"Goodness is always unconscious of itself!"

"You mean it is negative, as the Baron and my father said."

"Not so! It is the only positive thing in the world!"

"But where can one see it? I ask because I am so ignorant and I do not know. I thought to find a mother here in Swangate and to see goodness in her, but though Mrs. Eager is very kind and... what is the word?... condescending, as I think you say, I cannot feel she is a mother, as I have dreamed of a mother. Then there is Raymond. He is not bad, of course; but goodness in his eyes is to follow the fashion of the world. That is nothing positive. That is to be like india-rubber. On every side, I look, and the good people seem simply those who have no real ideas of their own. Even the religion seems mere custom."

"True religion is inward, not outward, I take it, Mrs. Raymond!"

"Yes! So I think! So my father thinks! That is why he bade me always obey the voice of nature."

"And you obeyed it in loving and marrying Raymond Eager?"

The stroke was dealt before Brand could check it. But Elsa looked at him in terror.

"Was.... it.... a.... mistake?" she asked. "Ach, no? Herr Brand! Say not that! It was not, it could not be a mistake. Nature spoke so clearly, and speaks now. My love is my only guide, my only help! It is terrible to feel it slipping away, as if I stood on a high rock over the sea out there, and it began to crumble beneath my

feet. First it was what I saw at the caves! Then the Herr Baron came! Tell me, Herr Brand! You are wise and I know you are strong! Tell me, why does the Baron bring evil wherever he comes? Why does he always see the bad side of people and of things?"

"I do not know *why* he sees it, but it is *because* he sees it that he is able to gain influence over them."

"Ach! Then that confirms what he told me himself, that only evil can influence evil."

"That is right! Evil cannot influence good!"

"But there is no good! The strength of a person is their power for evil, and it is only through that, that they are influenced. Ach! Terrible! Terrible! I look on every side and I only see bad influences at work. Since the Herr Baron came, Raymond and I are being wedged apart."

"Don't let it be so! That is part of the Baron's scheme. Don't you see he wishes to separate you?"

"But I cannot help it. I turned from Raymond, because I thought.... ach! a foolish thought!.... he preferred Antonia Carew before me, because she was clever and I am stupid. Then he turned from me, because the Herr Baron came, as if that was my fault. And since eight days, we meet as strangers—as *visitors*, who talk about the weather. I begin to think it is useless, and that, as he is tired of me, I must go back...."

"Heaven forbid! That would never do!"

"Then what must I do? You asked me to come to you as to a friend! I ask you now to help me."

"I will do so as far as it lies in my power!"

"And how far is that?—A short distance, I fear, since there is no power to cope with evil!"

"There is and you have it, Mrs. Raymond. I am not a romantic or a quixotic man. My general view of life, I'm afraid, is one of cynicism tempered by experience, and my attitude something that of the newspaper reporter, who looks on and describes without interfering. However, as you know, I've always been a friend of Ray's, and I'm sorry to see him deteriorating as he is. I cannot interfere between him and yourself, for that would be unwise, but I can and mean to stand between him and you and the Baron von Wolfenheim. But even in that, you have more power than I have."

"What is that?"

"The power of your love. That is, as far as I can see, the positive good force which alone can overcome all these evils. Be patient and try to bear with the trouble for a time. Raymond trusts you, and once the Baron is gone and... er... things settle down to their normal state, affection must prevail. I must try and deal with the Baron, and you must manage Raymond."

"But he does not seem to see my love."

"He will though! He will! His eyes are a little blindfolded now, but, once the bandage is removed, he will see clearly."

"I thank you very much, Herr Brand! You are a true friend and help to me! Yes! That is all my strength—to love and continue loving. I can do nothing else!"

In her simple way, she turned towards Jermyn Brand with outstretched hands and a face beaming with tender thankfulness, her fawn coloured dress, looking spirit-white in the early winter dusk.

But at this moment, the dog growled and went to Elsa's side, and the door opened to admit Raymond Eager and the Baron von Wolfenheim.

"You, Raymond, back already," said Elsa. "I did not hear you."

"No! Perhaps not! We came in by the back way. We could not help overhearing *you*, though, as we hung up our coats in the passage. But what are you sitting in the dark like this for? Ring the bell! Ho, Keziah, you there, bring the lamp at once, that we may see! And turn that dog out! He is not a drawing-room dog!"

XIII.

LIGHTS were brought, and the dog Teufel having with some difficulty been coaxed into the kitchen by Keziah, the maid-servant, aided by a command from Elsa, the three men and the one woman stood confronting each other. Raymond's face was full of annoyance and perplexity; the Baron stood by the door in a deprecating attitude; Jermyn Brand looked unwontedly stern and strong; Elsa appeared composed, but her eyes had the intense look, which Raymond had called a 'blaze of blue', and the pulse in her throat could almost be seen fluttering like a captive bird.

"Now, we can see, at all events," said Raymond, with the harsh laugh of one lashing himself to anger. "We can all see, and I also, even though I may have hitherto been a little blindfolded. So! Elsa is to deal with me, and you, Brand, with the Herr Baron! And in what way, may I ask, do you propose to deal with one who is not only a friend of mine, but also of my wife's?"

The artist was silent.

"Well! Why don't you speak?"

"Because least said, soonest mended, Ray! You seem to be under a grave misunderstanding."

"How?"

"If you had listened to the whole conversation, of which you only heard the fag end..."

"I heard enough, in all conscience!"

"Enough to put a distorted construction upon, perhaps!"

"Explain yourself! Tell us the whole conversation!"

The Baron intervened.

"I am but a spectator," said he quietly, "but a spectator is impartial. As men of the world, we know that these discussions are always conducted apart from the lady who is in cause. Of course, I do not know your English customs, but here the facts are simple."

"And what are they?" queried Brand sharply.

The nobleman shrugged his shoulders.

"You are a man of the world, Herr Brand. You have been abroad in Germany, in France. You know what it is. A husband returns home to find his wife conversing in the dusk with his vrendt. The word 'love' is mentioned. The husband overhears. He leaps to one conclusion. A mistake, perhaps, but what will you? It is natural."

"You hear, Brand!" echoed Raymond. "It is natural! I'm hanged if it isn't! So now, please explain!"

The artist curled his lip and said nothing.

"You needn't look so scornful! You heard what

the Baron said? I want to hear your explanation."

"You will hear nothing now or here, Ray. The Baron is right, so far as he says this sort of discussion is not one to be conducted in a lady's presence. But, anyhow, you are not yourself, Ray, or you would not countenance such insinuations as have fallen from the lips of this person...."

The Baron again interposed.

"My goodt vrendt, these are not nice things for a man of my years and position to hear before a lady...."

Jermyn Brand turned his back on the speaker.

"It is only for your wife's sake, Ray," he continued, "that I myself have countenanced them in a sense, by remaining quiet as I have done. But I must decline to listen further to the insults of a person of this character. You would not so forget your own dignity as to do so, only, as I say, for some cause or another, you are not yourself. So be sensible, Ray, and if there is a misunderstanding, we can clear it up ourselves, afterwards. It has nothing to do with third parties."

"That is not the question, my goodt vrendt! What you have said is a matter to be settled between you and me."

"Certainly, if you like, Baron—with the aid of the police, if necessary. But you see, Ray, where your wife is concerned..."

"Yes! where Mrs. Raymond is concerned," said the Baron. "In that also, I have a word to say. Her father is my vrendt. Ho asked me to see how

she was finding herself in England, to watch...."

"That is a lie, a lie!" exclaimed Elsa, fumbling in her pocket. "See! Here is my father's letter. He warns me.... What says he?... Here.... The pilot waits still in the harbour.... No! Not that! Ach, here! 'The Herr Baron knows thy husband's address. He has left the Schloss since three days. Perhaps he will in England be seen!' That is in German!"

Von Wolfenheim laughed.

"What is that for a warning? Just to tell thee an old friend knows thy address!" said he in his native tongue.

"You did not show me this letter, Elsa," observed Raymond.

"I brought it to show you, Raymond, the day I came to the caves, and found you with the Fräulein Carew..."

"You needn't go into that!" said Raymond hurriedly.

"As the subject has been broached, Ray," interposed Brand, "I may as well tell you that that was the chief subject of my conversation with your wife. You remember, you asked..."

"You offered, you mean."

"Yes! I offered, out of friendship, and you readily agreed. All would have been settled now, if you had not...."

"I don't want to hear anything about that, Brand!" said Raymond irritably. "It has nothing to do with this matter."

"It has a great deal to do with it, everything, in fact. Your wife's trust in you was unshaken!"

"Ach, yes, Raymond, Herr Brand speaks truly!" said Elsa, with a grateful glance at the artist. "Not what I saw at the cave, nor your going to meet the Fräulein Antonia at the Rectory, directly after asking Herr Brand..."

"That is false, Elsa! I went to see my mother! Antonia was there by accident."

"And at the church last Sunday, when you talked with her at the door?"

"Who told you that?"

"I went to meet you. But still I have perfect trust."

"To talk to an old vrendt, in a public place, Elsa, is not the same as to converse alone, as thou wert conversing with Herr Brand!"

This from the Baron.

No! Decidedly, it is not! You must admit that yourself, Brand!" observed Raymond.

"I admit nothing that this man says, Ray!" answered the artist, now with difficulty controlling his indignation. "I am surprised that you admit him in your house, much less pay attention to what he says, after the opinion you yourself expressed about him, and what I told you Vaszary...."

The Baron strode forward into the room.

Jermyn Brand turned and faced him.

Elsa went to the artist's side.

"Do not anger him!" she whispered. "He is terrible, when angry."

The Baron overheard and laughed.

"Ach! This is so silly; such a baby play! Like a scene in a Paris *drame conjugale!*"

"Of which you yourself know something!" said Brand.

"Was that true, Baron?" asked Raymond.

"True? A silly boulevard gossip, like that! My lamented wife died of an overdose of chloral. That was proved by medical examination. But that is nothing to you and Elsa. Herr Brand seeks to change the conversation! I am Elsa's vrendt! I hope I am also your *vrendt!* I want to see you both vrendts of each other, so that I may go to Germany and tell her father all is well. What do I find? A common domestic trouble! You, Herr Eager, have an old vrendt and talk with her. Elsa here, who knows not the world, . . . how should she? . . . resents it, and turns for help to Herr Brand!"

"Oh! Damn it all! don't go on, Baron!" exclaimed Raymond. "And you, Elsa, come away over here . . ."

"She fears I may wish to injure Herr Brand! But what the devil You see, Herr Eager, he assaults me!"

The artist had struck him in the mouth and made his lip bleed.

"Keep calm, Baron! Keep calm!" said Raymond. "For Heaven's sake, don't let us have any brawling. What do you mean, Brand, by turning my home into a pothouse?"

"You ask that, Ray? Have you any manliness left, are you bewitched or what, to stand by and hear your wife insulted...?"

"Shut up, both of you!" exclaimed Raymond.
"Do you want to madden me?"

"That is what this man is trying to do, Ray!" answered Brand. "I made further enquiries about him, when I was in London, and he is a person of bad character, a madman perhaps. You know that mark on your wife's arm, you told me of?"

"Well, well, what of it?"

"It is the mark of the Devil!"

Elsa gave a low moan, but Raymond laughed harshly.

"What superstitious drivel!" said he.

"Believe me or not, Ray, it is a sign used..."

"Oh, rot! If that's all you have to say, you had better go!"

The Baron looked on with a scornful air.

"I thought Herr Brand was at least a man of education!" said he.

The artist bestowed a pitying glance on Elsa, and, followed by Raymond, left the room.

XIV.

SCARCELY had the door closed on Raymond and Brand, when the Baron von Wolfenheim glided to Elsa's side.

"Thou seest, thou hearest, Elsa," said he rapidly in German. "Surely now thou hast awakened from thy foolish dream. With a husband like that, I do not wonder that thou makest a friend of Herr Brand, who is at least a man. I spoke as I did, merely to try them, as one tries coins by throwing them down on a table. One rang true, the other false!"

"But I love my husband!" moaned Elsa. "I must love, love, love! It is the only way. Herr Brand said so. It is the only good force in the world. All else is evil!"

"Ach! There thou art right, Elsa. But as the world is so evil, it can only be conquered by evil. What couldst thou?—To gain thy husband's trust and love.—Well, thou seest that Antonia Carew pleases him better than thou dost. Why? Because she is clever. Thou also must be clever to please him as she does, but for that, thou must possess the Master-Key, which I alone can give thee."

"Love is the only master-key!"

"Love! There can be no love where there is not understanding, Elsa. Thou dost not understand him, nor does he understand thee. Herr Brand understands thee better."

The words, which were true, though falsely uttered, seemed to corrode her heart.

She stretched out her hands like a blind girl feeling her way.

"Ach! Take me home!" she murmured. "Take me home to the Försthaus. My father was right. That is the harbour. This is the stormy sea. Ach! Terrible, terrible, to live in a world where all is wicked, all is evil; where nothing is understood, but in an evil sense. Take me away to the forest. There are my trees and my streams, which I understand and which understand me. There alone is Nature!"

"To-morrow I will fetch thee to take thee home!" whispered the Baron, laying his hand on her arm.

She shrank from his touch.

"Remove thy fingers! they burn," she exclaimed. "They burn like the mark that burned into my soul."

"Ach; yes! That mark is indelible, Elsa! It is useless to struggle further. It is the symbol of thy betrothal to the Prince of this world. As I have said often that the day would come when thou wouldst be willing, so I say now that it has come."

"What!... What do you say!"

The Baron heard Raymond's footstep in the passage.

"Nothing!" said he in a soothing tone, whispering,

"To-morrow thou wilt go home. I will fetch thee!"
Then aloud . . . "My dear Elsa, it is nothing!
Here is thy husband."

Raymond entered with a troubled expression of countenance.

Elsa ran towards him with outstretched arms.

Suddenly she stopped and averted her head.

"Elsa! What is the matter?" asked Raymond, looking enquiringly at the Baron, who sapiently shook his head.

Elsa looked again at her husband.

The mere sight of his face appealed to the love, which had now become a scourge. Gusts of conflicting passion visibly shook her form, as the wind shakes a poplar tree.

"Oh, Elsa, my dear Elsa, what is it?" repeated Raymond, in his turn moved by this tornado of primary forces.

"One does not possess what one does not understand," said she, "and you do not understand me. Go to thy old friend—the English maiden, who is clever and who does . . ."

"Hear me, Elsa! I swear I'll never go near her any more, if only you will be yourself again. It is all a misunderstanding!"

Again he approached her, but she waved him off with her hand, now like an angel barring the way to Paradise, now like a beautiful demon delivering a curse.

Raymond feared the look in her eyes, as he had once feared the dog Teufel's eyes.

Still he appealed.

"Elsa, Elsa! I tell you I see it is a misunderstanding! It is because we both love each other so well, that we have quarrelled! Deep love is so easily wounded and so proud. Hear me, Elsa!"

Still she kept him at arm's length.

"Damn it all! What does it mean?" he asked.

"It is the wild strain, of which I told you, Herr Eager!" said the Baron. "The gypsy strain, the fire in the blood. She was a child, a poor innocent child,—but now she is roused, you will find a devil!"

Raymond turned.

"Who the deuce are you, to apply such a name to my wife? I wish I had never let you into my house. I don't believe in superstition, but if I did, I would say it was you who were the being you name so glibly, and had let loose a legion in my house."

"My goodt vrendt! You are not yourself, as Herr Brand has told you. This is a matter for calm, philosophic investigation, not for violence. I myself have been struck in the mouth, here in this house. . . . an insult, a humiliation! But still I am calm. Believe me, these things are only manifestations of the master-force which guides human affairs."

"Bosh! Humbug! Nonsense! You may impose on your superstitions peasants with such jargon, but you don't get over me!"

"Get over?—What means that?"

"Deceive, hoodwink . . . also *get out!*"

"So? Well! I will go! But, mark you, how the

evil force spreads--like electricity! It is too strong even for gentlemanly courtesy, sweeps away politeness, and shows the naked savage underneath."

"No more of this! I can't stand such rubbish any longer! Out you go!"

"I go! But one piece of advice, my goodt vrendt! Beware of letting loose forces which you do not understand, and have not learned to control."

Raymond pointed to the door, and the Baron made his exit, wearing a look of quiet triumph.

The look frightened Raymond, and he instinctively locked and bolted the front door, as if he feared the unwelcome visitor would come back.

Then he turned to look for Elsa, but she had gone.

XV.

RAYMOND'S first impulse was to rush upstairs to Elsa in the bedroom.

"But no!" said he to himself. "Impulse has been my bane! Jermyn Brand was right there. What I have wanted, I have always insisted upon having. Now, I will wait till I get more self-control. Elsa also will be calmer in a little while. Perhaps she will get some sleep. It is better to wait!"

So he watched far into the night, listening to the rain and the rising wind.

He tried to write and worked with feverish haste, but, when he came to read over what he had written, he was his own most merciless critic, and threw the torn fragments of his manuscript into the fireplace.

He walked up and down the room, removing his slippers so as to be able to pace noiselessly. He tried the effect of sitting still. He smoked his pipe fiercely in the hope that tobacco might prove a true narcotic.

But all to no purpose!

The pain of being at feud with one whom, when all was said and done, he did love most passionately, seemed to gnaw into his very soul.

"I wonder if there can be anything in it!" he asked himself. "Brand is not a superstitious man, yet he seems to imagine there is! Poor Brand! What a fool I've been! I don't suppose we shall ever speak to each other again! But is there anything in this devil's mark, or whatever it is? If there is a Devil, that Baron But hang the man! Can I not banish him even from thoughts? O Elsa, Elsa, what a lot of trouble my love for you has let me in for! It all seemed so sweet and simple at first . . . and now! That priest at Kreuzdorf was right. It was the stone set rolling down hill. But still, I will make up to her now for all my folly and neglect. I see now, what a fool I've been in expecting her suddenly to become like all the rest of the people. It is her difference from them that is her charm. Yes, darling! I will make it up to you."

These were disconnected thoughts, not words, though so set down here. Therefore, perhaps, words but feebly image what was passing through Raymond's mind, for in all things and most of all in distress, speech is but too often a traitor to thought. Probably, it was because words are so traitorous, that so dense a cloud came between these two young creatures, whose affection was so great and whose experience so small. At least, such was an opinion hazarded afterwards by Jermyn Brand.

Where reason fails, instinct often finds its opportunity, and Raymond's whole soul went out to Elsa in a rapture of tenderness, until he felt that he could no longer withhold himself from going upstairs to make peace.

Even yet, his motives were mixed and perhaps he was eager rather to win back love for himself than to make restitution of it to Elsa. Having extinguished the lamp in the sitting-room, he stood on the bottom stair, holding his candle-stick in his hand, while he pictured to himself with a smile on his lips, the coming joy of a fond reconciliation.

He even trembled a little, like a lover on his wedding-night, who is afraid of seeming overbold to profit by the bliss that is his.

Outside the house, the wind raved with the winter fury of the southwest, and the rollers on the rocky spine of Penfold Point boomed like distant distress guns.

Showers of rain and hail spluttered against the window panes and rattled like falling shingle on the glass skylight at the top of the staircase.

But for the moment, Raymond recked not of the storm, and slowly ascended the stairs. At the upper landing, he again paused and looked thoughtfully at the bedroom door.

The wind lulled for a few moments and the rain swished steadily down on the skylight. The noise reminded him of the rushing waters of the Wolfsbach, and that memory still further softened him toward Elsa.

Suddenly, he thought he detected another sound, as of a woman moaning either in bodily pain or in an uneasy sleep.

Yes! It was unmistakable. Elsa, whether waking or sleeping, was sobbing and talking to herself.

"Oh, Raymond, Raymond, thou art my true prince, but thou hast despised and mocked at my allegiance. Subjects must not be guilty of treason, but princes in return must trust their subjects. Ach! But it is all nonsense, all evil! The kingdom of love is a dream, and in the kingdom of this world, there is but one prince and to him am I betrothed."

Does the speech sound stilted, the metaphor high flown?

Perhaps! But the German tongue has a statelier stride, than the practical, jog-trot of every day English, and the German heart still preserves not a little of the mediæval quaintness of so many of its cities. Elsa, the forest girl, was too uncultured to have learned the culture of reducing all language to counting-house level. She spoke as she thought, in a romantic mould, impressed with the image of that superstition, which, it has been said, is the poetry of nature.

But what matter how she spoke?

Her words conveyed her thought to Raymond, and his heart smote him with pity, with tenderness, also with a sort of unreasoning terror, for which he could not rationally account.

He went forward to open the door softly, but there was a barrier, more effective yet less tangible, than

the inch or so of deal planking,—the barrier of fear.

Raymond heard a low growl, and became conscious of eyes gleaming at him.

Holding the candle low, he saw the dog Teufel lying on the door mat.

“Good dog! Poor old fellow!” whispered Raymond, but the hound seemed to look sardonically amused at these blandishments, and watched Raymond’s movements, with the same latent suspicion as it had originally displayed at the Forest-House.

Thrice Raymond essayed to open the door.

Thrice was he warned off by a low, hostile growl.

He dared not resort to force, not only because he did not wish to cause a disturbance, but also because he was physically afraid of the slim, uncanny creature defying him.

He turned to withdraw silently.

At that same instant, the wind repented of its temporary abatement, and seemed to rush at the house, with the indescribable turmoil of a legion of monsters.

A sudden draught extinguished Raymond’s candle. Blinded for the moment by the sudden darkness, he tripped over a water can which had been left standing in the passage. The candle-stick fell from his hand and clattered down the stairs.

“The Devil must be in the thing!” he muttered, possibly with some truth. He listened for a moment, in case Elsa should have been awakened, but the minor clatter had been drowned in the great clamour of the storm.

Innumerable wings seemed to be flapping round the house, and strange creatures to be moaning, screaming and whistling in the air. Quite unnerved, he groped his way downstairs to the sitting-room, struck a match, and relit the lamp.

His mood quite changed and tenderness towards Elsa gave place to the same sort of bitterness as he had felt in Swangate Church.

"There *is* something in it!" he said to himself. "The Devil's mark is a real mark and I have married...."

What?

He did not complete the phrase, but stared gloomily at the table, thinking of old legends which he had read in a scoffing mood, of awful, secret beings, with power to control human destinies, of strange incarnations, of visible impersonations of the forces of evil, of the souls of the dead, of demons, Ay! and also of angels, and even of One higher than they.

He was in a mood of exaltation when spiritual scepticism was impossible, and the jangled nerves were ready to emit any discord.

But who shall say how much was physiological and how much a reality, the more dreadful that it was not to be classified by human standards?

He shut the door close, lest the dog, tiring of its vigil upstairs, might come down to the sitting-room: he sat with his back to the wall, for fear of intangible presences behind his back.

A horrid obsession seized him that the very

furniture was becoming endowed with a creeping sort of life: he seemed to recognise faces and expressions in the carving of a chair-arm or even the shape of the lamp-flame. Puerile, was it, or lack of self control?

All granted, but the fact remains that Raymond felt influences which he could not perceive and did not understand.

Finally, half ashamed of himself, yet conscious of his own powerlessness, he knelt down by the sofa and prayed that the evil thing might pass away from him. Thus praying, he fell asleep.

XVI.

WHEN Raymond awoke, he found himself lying on the sitting-room floor, close to the sofa, by which he had knelt down to pray.

It was broad daylight, but the clock on the mantelpiece had stopped, as he had forgotten to wind it on the previous night. Nevertheless, he heard Keziah humming over her work in the kitchen, and knew that it must be nearly eight, as the girl did not sleep in the cottage but at her mother's, and only came from half past seven in the morning till nine at night.

At first, he could not quite understand how he came to be lying where he was, instead of in his own bed, more especially as he found himself covered with a shawl, for which he could not in the least account.

He had a hazy recollection of having seen a white-faced figure enter the room in the grey of the winter dawn, and bend over him with a burning look of unquenchable love.

But that must have been a dream.

He rose to his feet and his vanity was shocked

at the reflection of his face in the mirror over the mantel-shelf. What a washed-out, dishevelled creature he looked! It would never do for Keziah to see him, when she came in to dust the room. She would probably think he had been drinking overnight.

He hurried upstairs, but came down again more quickly.

"Keziah!" he shouted.

"Yessir! Yessir!" said the girl running into the passage.

"Where's your mistress? I mean, didn't your mistress say when she'd be back, if she has gone out?"

"No, sir! No, sir!" was the answer, given in a flustered tone. "Leastways, I didn't think for to ask her. She was waitin' fully dressed like, when I come, an' she opened the door for me, an' went out as I come in. I reckon likely she be gone up to church service, seeing it be Sunday and Christmas Eve into the bargain! Mayst hear the bells! They be just begun!"

Raymond listened and heard the chimes, calling the faithful to Early Celebration.

"Peace and Goodwill towards men!" was their message, but to Raymond how ironical!

"Ah! Yes, she very likely has gone to church. I had forgotten what day it was."

"Yessir! But now I come to think, she took the dog along wi' her, an' whatever would she do wi' a gashly, great beast like that up to church?"

"Oh! . . . er . . . He'd wait outside till she came

out, Keziah! Thank you! Get breakfast at the usual time. I'll just go down and meet Mrs. Eager, as soon as I've finished dressing."

The girl returned to the kitchen, and Raymond ran back up to the bedroom. Early Celebration was at a quarter past eight. It must be now therefore, but a few minutes after the hour.

He plunged his face into cold water, hurriedly brushed his hair and donned a clean collar, so as to save appearances. Then, he hurried forth to the shore, and ran his eye quickly over the local time table, pasted on an advertisement board outside the Seaview Hotel. The first train on Sundays left at 7.50 a.m. and there was no other till afternoon.

He paused a moment in doubt whither to go next, but finally set off for the Rectory as fast as he could go.

He met his mother in the act of starting for the church.

"My dear boy!" she exclaimed.

"She's gone!" he gasped.

"Who?"

"Elsa! She has taken her dog!"

"What do you mean? Why shouldn't she take her dog?"

"I mean she can't have gone to church, or she wouldn't have taken that brute! We had a row last night, Elsa, that Baron, Jermyn Brand and myself! When they had gone, she went to bed, but I couldn't get in, because of the dog watching at the door. I slept in the sitting-room, and didn't

wake till just now. Then, I found she went out as soon as Keziah came at half past seven, and there was a train at ten minutes to eight, and... and... I was asleep..."

"Heavens, Ray! What do you mean? She has probably only gone to give the dog a run, though, to be sure, it's rather a drizzly morning!"

Raymond looked sadly at his mother.

"Don't look like that, Ray! Be a man!"

"So I mean to be, mother. I shall shoot *him*, whoever he is!"

"You don't... No!... My dear boy, you can't think... Oh! It's quite impossible. Elsa was an odd girl, but as good as gold, and devoted to you. She worshipped the very ground you walked on."

"So I thought, mother, but I suppose I tried her too far, or other people got round her, or... But what's the use of conjecture? There's the fact! She's gone! And only last night I made up my mind to try and be kinder and to understand her better."

"My poor boy! Poor Ray! I always thought it was a mistake... a foreigner with whom you could have nothing in common. I was afraid... But it can't be what you seem to suspect. Who has she gone away with? That Baron von whatever his name is?"

"He, or..."

"Or whom?"

"I'd rather not say, mother!"

"But it can't be what you think, Ray. Worldly women are good actresses, but not a simple girl

like Elsa. Her very eyes looked wells of truth. She can't have deceived us all so terribly."

"There was no deceit, mother. I expect she only acted on the spur of the moment."

"Well! Come indoors, Ray, and tell me all about the row last night. I can't go to church, now. My poor boy! My poor boy!"

"I must go on to church to make sure she is not there, and then I must go to the station to find out what passengers left by the early train."

"No, no, Ray! You can't do that! Whatever has happened, you don't want everyone in the town to know it. Think of me! Think of your poor father, of our position!"

"Am I to sacrifice myself to that?"

"No, my boy, there is no sacrifice. Even if you discovered what you fear to know, it wouldn't help matters a bit. Would it now?"

"No, I don't suppose it would, but I *must* find out!"

"Yes, yes, of course. But don't make it worse than you need. The only way to avoid scandal, if there is ground for it, will be to give out that Elsa has gone to stay with her friends in Germany! You must think of the Rector and your brother! It will be a hard blow to them, though I can't believe your fears are grounded. But let's walk on to the church together and see! Perhaps she is there, after all!"

Raymond agreed, though he felt that the suggestion was a forlorn hope. A hurried glance over

the sparsely filled church sufficed to prove the absence of Elsa's queenly head; in fact, her presence would have been almost as extraordinary as was her absence.

"She may be on the sands with the dog!" said Mrs. Eager.

"The Teufel is not a water-dog," observed Raymond with some bitterness. "But I tell you what—I'll just go to the Station Hotel and ask if the Baron's still there. There's no harm in my doing that, anyhow."

"I'll go with you, dear!"

So mother and son tramped along the muddy road to the station, in the drizzly December morning, she holding on to his arm more to assure him of the sympathy of her presence than to obtain support.

"Went away by first train's marnin'!" was the expected, yet dreaded answer given by the sleepy Boots, who answered Raymond's enquiry.

In spite of his mother's restraining arm, Raymond darted across the road to question a porter, whom he saw locking the railway booking-office door.

"I only asked about the train, mother!" said he, as he slowly returned. "It connects with a fast train at Pinebourne and reaches London about twelve."

"I hardly like suggesting it, Ray, because we want to keep the matter as quiet as possible, for everyone's sake, but still he's such an old friend and he never gossips...."

"You mean...?" asked Raymond, with a strange look.

"Yes, why not consult Jermyn Brand? He is more practical than your poor father. I'll walk up there with you, if you like, though I hope to goodness no one notices us trapesing about the town in this extraordinary manner."

Raymond did not reply, but tacitly consented, by starting to walk up hill in the direction of the artist's house.

Brand's French housekeeper answered the door.

"Monsieur Brand!" said she. "Ah no! He 'as not been in ze 'ole night, and I wait for 'im wiz ze greatest impatience. 'Ave you not seen 'im?"

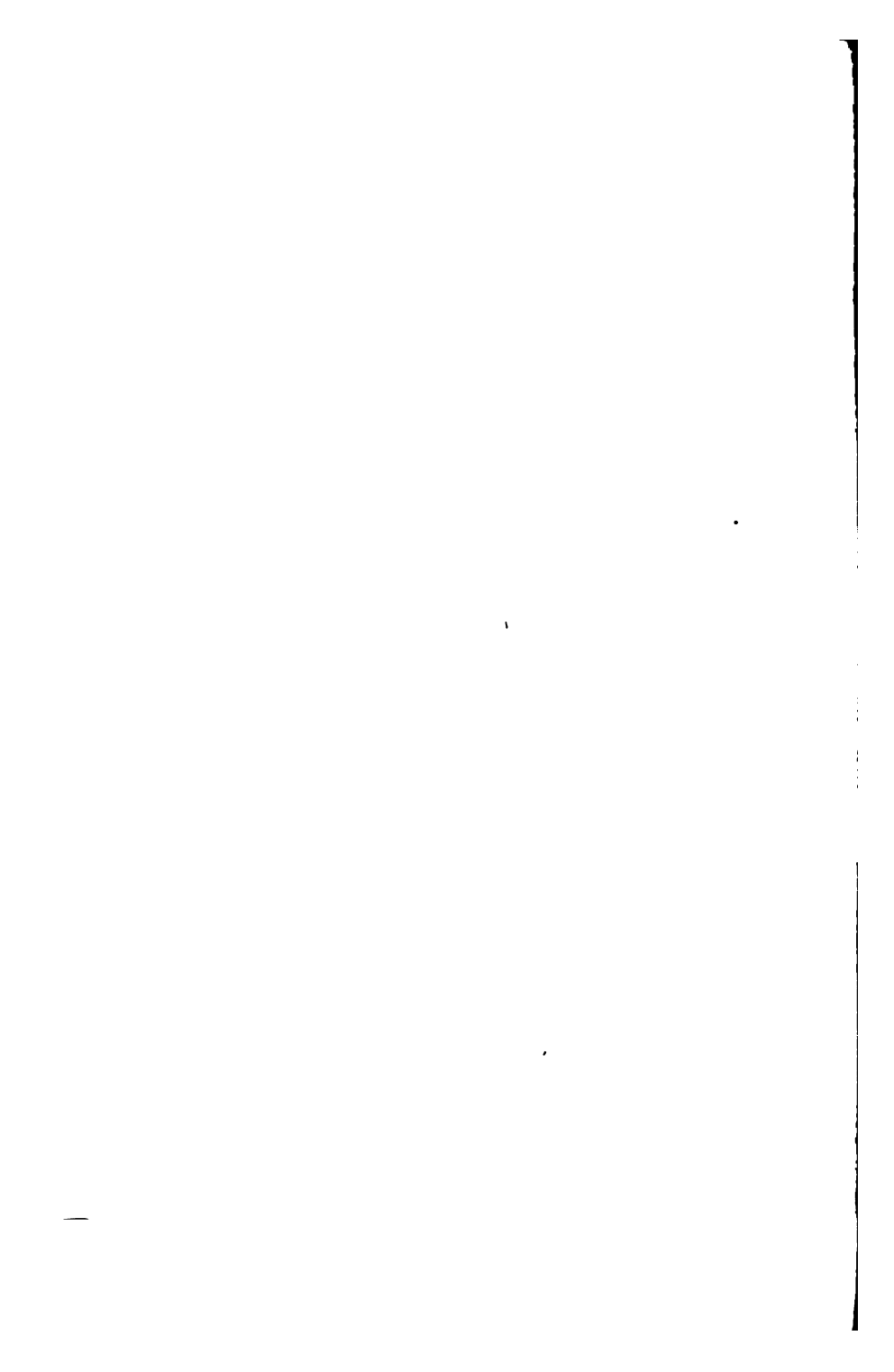
"What! Has he gone away also?" Mrs. Eager could not help exclaiming.

Raymond turned to her with a piteous expression of dismay and bewilderment.

"My poor boy! Try and not think about it! Come, I will go back home with you and see that you have your breakfast all right. You must want it, badly. You can't go without that!"

Act the Third

BEYOND THE WORLD



Act the Third

BEYOND THE WORLD

I.

WHILE, at Swangate in winter, Nature wept and wailed, away in the German forest land, she was mute.

Hill on hill, as far as eye could reach, was covered with a mantle of frozen snow, against which the pine trees stood out like files of dark-coated grenadiers, stiff backed veterans with white locks and straggling beards.

Not a sign of motion was visible, and, save, now and then, when an over-weighted branch let slip its burden of snow with a shuddering thud, not a sound was to be heard.

The earth seemed to stare at the pitiless sky, like the face of a frozen corpse. The sky itself was sunless and veiled with grey.

There being no bright light, there was also no shadow.

When night came on the scene, it was as if day were falling asleep.

The interior of a solitary cottage near the entrance

to the Wolfsbachthal, afforded a warm contrast to the chill desolation. The house-father smoked his long pipe and the good wife plied her spinning wheel, while the children played round the Christmas tree, or talked of the Christ-child and the presents He had sent them by the good Santa Claus.

But, suddenly, the little ones huddled together like frightened sheep, the mother paused in her spinning and the goodman cocked his eye at the gun hanging on the wall. A moaning sound rose somewhere in the distance, swelled like a coming wind, and died away as mysteriously as it had commenced. The forest seemed to have sighed in its sleep, and sunk to a deeper slumber.

For a few moments, the silence of the land, appeared to have entered the cottage, till the mother re-started the merrily purring wheel, the children all began to speak at once, and the house-father took his pipe from his mouth, to observe, "The wolves are hungry to-night!"

"They are getting very bold, too, Gottlieb," answered the wife. "Fritz saw two quite close to Kreuzdorf, as he came home from church on Christmas Eve."

"All creatures are bold when they want food, even men. The wild boars too, are becoming tame as pigs. Therese Wirth met one in open daylight by the Mariabrunnen, and opened her umbrella in its face. I know not which was the more terrified and surprised, she or the boar. Ach, yes! The forest is getting a wild place, since the Herr Baron

does not hunt any more. A few years ago, when the Schloss was full of huntsmen every winter, the wild animals were not nearly so numerous. But now it is quite a wolves' home, a wolves' paradise, one might say!"

"Assuredly, but as long as there are only wild beasts, I do not mind. They say in the village that lights have been seen again at the Augustin-kapelle!"

"Yes! And the Herr Baron has returned. Hans, the innkeeper's son, it was, who said it, and he had it from Albrecht, who came down to the village to buy provisions for the castle."

"So? Then it must be true, though it is strange for the Herr Baron to stay alone at his castle in winter, when he does not hunt any more."

"They say he is not alone, that he has a *waldfrau*... a forest woman..."

"*Lieber Gott!* Is it true?"

"I do not know! It was but yesterday he came. He drove by sledge through Schattendorf from Bad Fichtelstein, and with him were a woman and a dog... a black dog. They were seen!"

"Hush! Gottlieb! See how the children are listening! They will have bad dreams."

"Ach! And well they may! So may we all! I met the Ritter this very evening. He had his gun and I asked him whither he was going. 'To shoot a wolf!' said he."

"What meant he?"

"How do I know? *Thou* knowest as well as I

do! But that black dog has been seen once before already in his company."

"At the Försthaus?"

"Certainly!"

"Is it possible? And the woman...! Ach! I knew how it would be! She was never married! I hope my little Klärchen may never meet a rich English traveller!"

"Hush! The Herr Engländer looked well enough, a boy, but with a true face! He is not to blame."

"Then it was she! Yes, she was a bad lot!"

"Father Salomo does not think so!"

"Ach! That is because he is a man as well as a priest!"

"Nay! Nay! Father Salomo is not misled by beauty!"

"Beauty, Gottlieb? There is more beauty in Klärchen's little finger nail!"

"Well, may be! But Father Salomo speaks of her as of one rescued from the devil."

"By a foreign heretic!"

"Certainly, but better a heretic than..."

The speech was clipped short, by a unanimous shriek from the children and their mother, almost drowning the sudden noise which had startled them.

"Dear God! What is it?" asked the mother.

"A gun, mother!" said Fritz, the eldest boy.

"Thou art right, my son!" observed his father. "And it sounded as if it were fired not far from the house. Give me my own gun and I will go and see."

"Nay, Gottlieb! It is not safe!" urged his wife.

"Safe or not, I must go! Perhaps the Ritter has shot his wolf."

"Yes! And ask him to give me the skin, father," said Fritz. "He will not need it. There must be plenty of skins at the Försthaus."

"His wolf may have no pelt!" observed the father grimly. "But hand me my lantern. The night is dark, though the snow gives light."

The peasant went out and the wife and children stood at the door, watching the lantern playing hide and seek among the tree trunks, till it dwindled to a mere speck and finally disappeared.

Having ordered the children to bed, the mother sat watching for her husband's return. After about twenty minutes, she heard him whistle, and opened the door to see him staggering towards her through the snow, carrying a heavy burden in his arms.

"What is it, Gottlieb?" she asked, hurrying out to help him.

"A man! He has been shot in the shoulder. Help to carry him into the inner room. He has fainted from loss of blood."

"Not dead?"

"I think not! His body is warm against my chest. Make some water hot, that we may bathe his feet to draw the blood back to its channels. The frost has congealed the blood already. Perhaps it is that which may save his life. Give me a shirt and I will cut it up for bandages, as I did for myself after the fight at Woerth."

He carefully laid the body down on the floor, and, deftly cutting away the coat and under garments, exposed the wound to view.

"It is a bullet wound! I expect the ball has passed though the top of the lung and lodged against the shoulder blade. We cannot extract it, but, perhaps with snow bandages, we can prevent more bleeding. The cold, too, will keep off inflammation, though had he stayed there longer, he would have been frozen to death, even had not the wolves got at him."

"But who dost thou think he is, Gottlieb, and what brought him into the forest alone at night, on foot? It is a mercy he was not devoured alive!"

"How do I know? He is a stranger, that's plain! There are papers in his pocket, but I cannot read them. The writing is not German character. He must lie still on the floor, here, to-night. Fetch the mattress off Fritz' bed, and take the boy in along with you. I will watch here and renew the snow-bandages, as they melt. In the morning he may be better, and you can watch him, while I go to Kreuzdorf to ask Hans to fetch a doctor from Bad Fichtelstein."

"And bring Father Salomo back with you, Gottlieb. Perhaps, he will be able to read the papers, if they are Latin. It is very strange. I wonder who the man is, and who shot him and why. Surely, this could not be...?"

"The Ritter's wolf, Klara! Who knows? Father

Salomo says the worst wolves are two-legged! But that is not our business! So you will say nothing about the Ritter going out to shoot a wolf! Why should he not? He is the Herr Baron's wolf master."

"And the Herr Baron is our master!"

"Exactly! That is why it is wise to know nothing. Then we cannot be accused of saying what is false. But do thou go to bed now, and I will watch. First of all, though, fetch the milk that was saved for Klärchen's breakfast. The wounded need more nourishment than even the children, and I must give him some, if he wakes. I never knew before why God let me be wounded at Woerth. But now I know. It was that I might help another wounded man. Doubtless then, he also is wounded for some good purpose. Sleep well, and in the morning, we will see what is best to be done."

The good dame went upstairs, and, save for the laboured breathing of the injured man, silence once more enwrapped the cottage and the snow-bound forest.

II.

THE wounded man was conscious next morning, but an effort to speak caused hemorrhage, and he was compelled to be silent. He was lying exhausted on the mattress on the floor, when Father Salomo entered the cottage.

A puzzled look overspread the priest's face as he set eyes on the man.

"Do you know him?" asked Gottlieb.

"It seems to me I have seen his face before, but I cannot now recollect where. Have you the papers you spoke of?"

"Nay! They are still in the pocket of his coat. I would not take them without witnesses."

"And the coat?"

"He is still wearing it. We had to cut it to dress the wound, but did not remove it. But see, he makes signs. He cannot speak!"

Father Salomo bent over the mattress.

"He wants to write," said the priest. "Bring pencil and paper!"

Gottlieb bustled about, and finally produced a child's slate and slate pencil.

The sick man nodded.

"Is there anything you wish, meinherr? We have already sent for a doctor!" said Father Solomo, handing him the writing materials.

The other painfully wrote the word 'telegram'.

"You wish to send one?"

A nod.

"Write the message on the slate, and I will copy it and have it sent to Bad Fichtelstein. There is no telegraph at Kreuzdorf."

The other's eyes brightened at the word 'Kreuzdorf'.

"Am I there?" he asked in writing.

"Within a quarter of an hour of the village! Is that where you were going?"

"Försthaus, Tannenberg!" were the words in reply.

The priest and Gottlieb exchanged glances.

"Have you any message, which we could take the Ritter von Geroldseck, the forester, that is?"

"I wish to see him."

"Is it urgent?"

"As soon as possible!"

"So? Then I will go myself to the Försthaus, and, if you will write your telegram, I will have it sent from Kreuzdorf to Bad Fichtelstein."

"The telegram can wait till I have seen the forester."

"Is that wise? Your friends may be anxious, and ill as you are, I should not delay the opportunity of putting my affairs in order."

A ghost of a smile flitted over the sick man's lips.

"I am here on the affairs of other people."

"So! But you did not expect to be ill as you are, and in justice to the honest Gottlieb, who found you and brought you into his house, it is well your friends should be communicated with. Otherwise, he may be suspected of having done the ill deed. Do you know who shot you?"

"It was an accident. It was to frighten away wolves. But tell me, do you know if the Baron von Wolfenheim has returned."

"Certainly! He reached the castle at noon yesterday. Are you his friend? Shall I send word to him? That would simplify matters."

The other shook his head violently.

"Was the Baron alone?" he asked on the slate.

"They say a woman...."

"I will send my message now!" wrote the pencil hurriedly.

Father Salomo and Gottlieb withdrew while the telegram was being written.

"Is it true!" asked Gottlieb, "that the Ritter's daughter has returned?"

"So they say! She is with the Herr Baron!"

"And this man was following! Is he, perhaps, the Englishman, with whom she went away?"

"Nay! This man is much older. Her husband was quite young."

"Husband?"

"Certainly!"

"Then why is she with the Baron, and why does this man follow her? So much evil is incredible!"

The sick man rapped on the floor to attract their attention.

"Is the message private?" asked Father Salomo, as he took the slate. "I ask, because it will have to be copied."

A shake of the head was the answer.

Father Salomo looked at the slate, but handed it back, saying, "I cannot read English cursive writing."

The other re-wrote the message in German character.

It read,— "Eager, Swangate, England. Elsa is at Kreuzdorf. Come!"

There was no signature.

The priest seemed about to ask a question, but checked himself, and said gravely, "I will copy this, mein herr, and have it despatched at once. Then I will go to the Försthaus, and inform the Ritter you wish to see him. Is that all I can do?"

The wounded man nodded.

The snow on the Tannenberg seemed even deeper than elsewhere and the only beaten path from the Försthaus led not towards Kreuzdorf, but in the direction of the Augustin-kapelle and the Schloss Wolfenheim. It was a common jest, in fact, of the peasants that winter, that all roads seemed to lead to Wolfenheim,

"A god-forsaken place!" muttered Father Salomo, as he approached, and when he glanced through the open door and saw the interior, which had looked

so cool and inviting to Raymond in the hot summer weather, he was inclined to repeat the remark.

"Woman forsaken!" would have been as apposite, for the room was a very cave of unfeminine dirt and disorder. Newly flayed skins of beasts littered the floor and the tiles were stained with blood. Two guns lay across the table in perilous proximity to a pile of unwashed crockery. A half cut loaf, a paper packet of coarse granulated tobacco, a half-empty bottle of beer, a flask of schnapps and a long pipe, completed the plenishing of the homeless place.

Some burning twigs crackled in the stove, as apology for fire, and the dogs growled at each other over half-frozen morsels of offal, flung carelessly wherever they chanced to fall.

The Ritter sat with his head in his hands, glowering at the feeble blaze, only rousing himself to curse or kick the dogs which came in his way.

Father Salomo coughed to attract his attention, and the man rose to his full height, like a furrowed column still standing amid general ruin.

"Ach! It is you!" he said, resuming his seat. "I thought it was another."

"What other?"

"That is my business. Are you alone?"

"The priest of God is never alone."

"Ach! I mean, are there other men with you?"

"Do you expect others?"

"I expect nothing. Why have you come here to disturb me? Is it a mission of duty again?"

"You are wanted!" said the priest curtly.

"I am ready?" answered the other, again rising. "Bid them enter and take me by my own hearth.... or, rather, the Herr Baron's hearth. The priests took mine!"

"You are to come with me!"

"With *you*? Why with you? Nay! I will not resist, but what insult to send a priest to me! What have I to do with priests, except to revile them? Am I to owe *all* the evils of my life...."

"My friend! You seem to misunderstand me," said Father Salomo in a milder tone. "I have not come to injure you."

The Ritter gasped.

"Not.... injure! Then... why..."

"It is quite simple. I was called in to attend a wounded man...."

"Wounded! Only wounded, say you?"

"Yes! But so seriously..."

"That they wish me to confront him before he dies?"

"You are talking wildly, Herr von Geroldseck. The man who wishes to see you is a stranger to me. He cannot be to you, as you seem to expect him."

"I expect nothing, I tell you, but I thought it might be.... my son-in-law."

"Come to fetch his wife, eh?"

"What is that to you? Do your own duty."

"My duty is to right the wrong, wherever it is found. And in this matter, I am sure there is great wrong."

"Indeed there is!" said the Ritter bitterly. "But where is the man who wants me?"

"At Gottlieb Müller's house by the Wolfsbach-thal! You need not look at me suspiciously. What do you fear?"

"Fear! We Von Geroldsecks fear nothing but. . . ourselves!"

"So? A proud boast, but perhaps with an element of truth. The more we know, the more we fear ourselves. But come at once, for the day is passing and the matter is urgent."

"I come, though it is strange for me to go forth with a priest for a guide, but the victory is to the strong and evil has won, or rather has emerged undisguised, for goodness so-called is merely one of the protean forms of evil."

"A house divided against itself, my friend, will"

"Well! I do not dispute it. The house divided against itself is the house of human nature. There, is the struggle, which cannot be avoided, always going on, till blood is shed innocent blood and guilty blood, and the evil principle wins another victory. The house crumbles and falls on the dead bodies, while outside"

"Well, outside, what are there?" asked the priest, for the forester had paused in his tirade.

"Wolves and priests!" came the answer like a pistol-shot.

III.

GOTTLIEB MÜLLER met Father Salomo with a smiling face.

"Medizinrath Schleiermark came himself from Bad Fichtelstein," said he, "and he said it was a shame I had not studied medicine myself, for I would have made a famous physician, greater even than he; and he makes thousands of marks, so they say, at Bad Fichtelstein in the cure season, and thousands more by his Hygienic Institution. There is Pastor Kneipp who makes money by his water cure, so why not I with my snow cure?"

"Not so fast, Gottlieb! Not so fast! You people think too much of money!"

"Nature is crucified on a gold cross!" muttered the Ritter.

"What did the doctor say of the sick man, Gottlieb?" continued the priest.

"That he was famous! The wound is healing already, but he must not be moved for some days."

"Is the bullet extracted?"

"No! That is a pity, but it is safer to leave it than to try to remove it. As I said, it is probably

flattened against the shoulder blade. Medizinrath Schleiermark will send an assistant to-morrow, and, if she is wanted, a nurse from the Hygienic Institution. They cannot come to-night, the roads are too bad. But I told him, we have no room, and my wife can nurse him. He is better with us than at the inn. But no expense is to be spared, for the Herr is a rich Englander."

"His name!"

"It sounds real German! But he is a painter of pictures, and for a few inches of canvas gets more money than I...."

"But what is the name?"

"Herr Brand."

"So? Then I *have* seen him. It was at the *bignig* with Father Habingsreiter in the Sternbachthal by Schattendorf. Ach! He has aged since then, and so have I."

"But is it not wonderful?" urged Gottlieb. "Simply for Christian charity, I go to succour a poor traveller in the snow, and bring him in, as I would a poor wounded comrade, and he proves to be such a great man! Ach! It is like the story of St. Christopher!"

"It is a lesson, Gottlieb, that charity is always rewarded."

"Yes! And had I not been wounded at Woerth, I might not have been able to help!"

"You are right, Gottlieb. Every occurrence is a link in a chain of good which we cannot see!"

As the priest spoke, he turned and looked keenly

at the Ritter von Geroldseck, who frowned and then sighed.

"Perplexed?" asked Father Salomo.

"Yes, but not by that baby talk. I have seen the chain, and it is evil . . . a chain which fetters all the world! Why I am puzzled is that this great man wishes to see me."

"Probably to ask you, as forester, to have the woods hunted for the man who tried to take his life. The English are very vindictive, so I have heard, though it is always the law that is their sword. But go in to him now! You are expected. Gottlieb and I will smoke a pipe in the outer room, to keep us warm!"

The Ritter held himself very stiff, and entered.

Jermyn Brand beckoned to him to come to the side of the improvised bed, and signed to him to stoop low.

"I can only speak in a whisper," he explained.

"Even that is really forbidden, but necessity conquers obedience. You may wonder why I've sent for you, but I am a friend of your daughter . . ."

"Ach! That, I know already!" said the Ritter between his teeth.

"You have seen your daughter, then?"

"No! I have not seen her, but I have seen the Baron von Wolfenheim."

"Why should he refer to me, if he did do so?"

"Because he also is a friend of my daughter. At least, I will not say 'friend', for there is no friendship between man and woman, except the friendship of love; but in that Nature speaks, and here . . ."

"What?"

"Evil!"

"You are right, as far as the Baron is concerned."

"And you also, is it not so?"

"How?"

"Why were you shot?"

"I do not know. In mistake for a wolf, I suppose. The man who fired at me, exclaimed, 'So perish all wolves!' That is all I know, and then I fell. But I did not send for you to speak about myself, but about your daughter. Is she at the Schloss Wolfenheim?"

"What is that to you, if she is or is not?"

"Little perhaps to me, but everything to her and to her husband."

"They quarrelled!"

"That I know already!"

"Don't interrupt! I am too weak to talk much. It was due to a misunderstanding, and before it could be cleared up, she left her home, intending, I am certain, to come back to you.... to the harbour, as she called it."

Von Geroldseck's look softened, but he forced a frown.

"You need say no more, Herr Brand, you are a wounded man, and, even a wounded enemy is spared in warfare. But I know all that there is to be known. A simple, common story, as I used often to hear in the world. The husband neglecting his wife, the so-called friend intervening, the husband discovering the deceit, the quarrel, the lovers' flight.

Ach! It is all so old, older than the French novel!"

"I was afraid you would hear that, if the Baron got your ear first," said Brand composedly. "It is the lie by insinuation, the most difficult lie to disprove. What more did you hear?"

The forester was visibly discomposed by the painter's calmness.

"What more?" he stammered. "Well! Every woman.... even my Elsa!.... Ach! It is all nonsense! What is the use of saying anything? You are rich; you wished to buy Elsa with money. The Baron is wise; he offered her knowledge. She had done with Nature, and she chose the next best thing."

"Is that your opinion of your daughter, then?"

"What has opinion to do with it? Here are facts. You wished to take Elsa away. The Baron came between and she went with him, as he asked her to, long years ago. It is all evil, but so is the world!"

"You hold strange opinions, Herr von Gerold-seck!"

"I have lived!"

"Well, having lived, do you not know that misunderstandings and untruths cause more evil than evil itself? Having lived, how can you place any faith in a man of the Baron's character?"

"Because he was the only man who held out his hand to me, when all the others put theirs behind their backs."

"You believe him rather than me, then?—The man who is said to have killed his wife!"

"This is not a matter of belief, but of choice. Elsa has chosen."

"She has not chosen."

"Then why did she leave her husband whom she loved at the beginning? Her belief in his love was destroyed by a false friend, who followed her even here to Kreuzdorf, like a wolf...."

For the first time, Jermyn Brand started.

"It was you, then!" said he, looking the Ritter straight in the face.

"Yes! It was I. I am glad you are not killed, and I hope you will recover; but so would I serve any man, who...."

"Then serve your friend the Baron, similarly, for it is he who has chiefly wrecked your daughter's happiness. She is in peril from him, now, if she is at the Castle! Are you mad or in league with the Baron, or what, that you do not or will not see the danger? Why didn't he bring her straight to you at the Försthaus, if he wished to befriend her?"

"Because the Försthaus is a miserable place in winter, and, since she left, it is no longer a home."

"Home? No, I should think it is not a home! But better than the Baron's castle. Do you know what sort of man he is, Herr von Geroldseck? Do you remember the mark he made?"

"Who told you of that?"

"Never mind who told me! Do you know what that mark is? Do you know that Von Wolfenheim is a man who worships vice, in the person of its

originator? That he was notorious in Paris as one of the master-spirits of the abominable secret sect of Satanists, who, while professing infidelity, substituted the worship of the Devil for the worship of God, and revived the most abominable orgies of the secret mysteries of the Ancients, combining the corruption of Carthage and Phœnicia with the childish superstition and blasphemy of mediæval Black Magic? Is that a man to trust your daughter to? Heavens! When I think of her purity, beauty, and childlike innocence in such a den of iniquity, I can hardly lie patient on this bed."

The Ritter listened quietly to this outburst, every word of which, whispered as it was, seemed to have an intense snake-like sibilancy.

"You make a mistake, Herr Brand!" said he in answer. "We do not believe in the mediæval Devil, much less worship him. We are philosophers, who have spent our lives searching for the First Cause. That First Cause, we have found in the Evil Principle, which is the paramount force in human affairs. There may be a greater force, but we have not found it. Therefore, we search into the Evil Principle, which is the secret of knowledge and power, and we avail ourselves of the knowledge of the Ancients combined with modern science, to produce a personal manifestation and do honour to the Emperor of Mortality!"

"Then you also are one of them, Herr von Geroldseck?" said Brand. "Your daughter said you only believed in Nature!"

"So I do, but man cannot or will not live by pure Nature. He lives by a false system and the spirit of that system is the Evil Principle!"

"You are mad!" said Brand.

"All philosophers are called madmen! But you yourself, who say that the Baron is not to be trusted, why should you leave England and come here to Germany in winter after my daughter?"

"I promised to befriend her, and, to a certain extent, I am responsible...."

"You admit it? Ach, then, I am justified in having shot you! I thought Elsa would be able to live by Nature. You destroyed her simplicity, you and her husband and the others. Now she belongs to us, and no one else shall interfere. If she had been happy, I might, perhaps, have believed in something else besides Evil, but now...."

The Ritter shrugged his shoulders.

"You may go!" said Brand. "But I warn you that, if your daughter is not rescued in two days time...."

"What will you do?"

"You will see! I have not acted hitherto, for your daughter's sake."

"Pfui! You are like a dog who cannot get what he wants for himself and tries to prevent any other getting the same thing! Ach! It is all nonsense. Why should you interfere?"

"Because I believe in the power of pure love!"

"So did I.... once!" said the forester bitterly, as he left the room.

IV.

IT was the festival of the Epiphany—the ‘Showing Forth.’

As Father Salomo disrobed in the sacristy after the evening service at Kreuzdorf parish church, he meditated on the wonderful chapter of Isaiah from which the lesson for the day, was taken:—

“ Arise, shine; for thy light is come.... For, behold, darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness the people.”

He could not help giving a local application to these latter words, thinking of the powers of evil, by which all men are surrounded, but of which he seemed to see the visible manifestation. As he pondered on the promises of the prophet that the darkness would be dispersed, he heard the jingling of sleigh-bells in the distance.

“ Perhaps the doctor from Bad Fichtelstein. I hope Herr Brand is no worse!” he murmured, folding up and putting away his vestments. “ Or, perhaps again, it is an officer from the district court, who has heard of the attempt on the Englishman’s life. Such news soon reaches the

police, I must go up to Gottlieb Müller's to see."

But the project proved abortive. The sleigh bells drew nearer, and presently he could hear them jangling by the gateway of his own garden.

He hurried out to see who his untimely visitors could be. Black against the snow, he saw a well-appointed sledge, with a driver and two travellers—a man and a woman.

Could it be the Baron von Wolfenheim and Elsa?

The question was answered by a man's voice calling "Father Salomo!"

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the priest. "Can it be Herr Raimund Eager?"

"Yes, it is indeed I myself."

"You got the telegram and came so quickly, all across the sea from England in winter?"

"Yes! Thank you for sending it!"

"I did not send it. It was your friend, who is wounded."

"Who? What friend?"

"Your friend, Herr Brand!"

"You hear that, mother?"

"What, dear? I didn't understand the German!"

"The priest says Jermyn Brand sent that message. He is wounded."

"Will you not come in?" asked Father Salomo. "You and the noble lady!"

"My mother! She insisted on coming with me, in case I needed help."

"So? What a beautiful lesson in motherly love!

But you will both catch cold standing here. Come in!"

"We must go to the Gastwirtschaft to get rooms first."

"Do not take that trouble. I will send someone to tell Hans to have them ready. He is master now. His father is dead, It is a terrible winter for the old and the weak."

"Father Salomo asks us to come in, mother. He will send to the inn to secure our rooms."

Not without misgiving, Mrs. Eager alighted from the sledge and followed her son into the house. It was a parlous plight for her, the wife of an English clergyman, to find herself the guest of a Popish priest, and she devoutly hoped that Swan-gate might never come to hear of it. However, supper was spread on the table and there was an aroma of hot coffee very grateful to the nostrils, after the chilling drive from Bad Fichtelstein. The hospitable cleric at once filled his own cup for Mrs. Eager, and ordered his housekeeper to bring more coffee and lay two more places at table.

"So!" said Raymond. "You say Herr Brand sent the telegram and he is wounded. Tell me how it happened."

"We know nothing. He was found by Gottlieb Müller, a peasant, lying wounded in the snow—shot through the lung. Gottlieb took him in and tended him, and Medizinrath Schleiermark of Bad Fichtelstein saw him next day, and said he will probably recover. I asked Herr Brand if he wished

to have the man who shot him arrested, but he would not."

"Does he know who it was?"

"I think so."

"Do you?"

"I could not say."

"Was it the Herr Baron?"

"I think not. But Herr Brand said he would do nothing, till he saw if his telegram was answered. I must send word to him you have come."

"Not yet! Wait!" said Raymond.

"What does the priest say, Ray?" asked Mrs. Eager.

"I'll tell you afterwards, mother. I have too much to ask, to stop to interpret now. Everything appears stranger than ever."

"But she is not with Jermyn Brand?" queried the mother.

"No, it seems not!—But you know why I've come?" asked Raymond in German, turning to Father Salomo.

"For your friend?"

"For my wife! Is she at the Försthaus?"

"I did not see her when I went there. The place was like a wild beast's den. She is probably at Schloss Wolfenheim."

"Did Herr Brand and the Baron meet before she went there?"

"I cannot say. The Baron and... er... your honourable wife were seen driving from Bad Fichtelstein early in the day. Herr Brand was not

found till evening. He seems to have walked through the forest. He must be a brave man."

"Then, he never got to the Castle?"

"Not even to Kreuzdorf. Only so far as the Wolfsbachthal, where the road crosses the stream."

"I have been a fool!" exclaimed Raymond.

"How?" asked the priest quietly.

"I cannot tell you now, but you will learn afterwards. There has been an evil influence at work. I seem to have been groping my way in a fog. But there is no time to lose, I must go to the Schloss Wolfenheim to-night. I trust I may not be too late."

"Is it so bad?" asked Father Salomo. "Perhaps the Ritter has his daughter with him now!"

"Even so, as we drove past the Mariabrunnen I saw the signal lights, you once spoke of, flashing from the Raubfenster. The Ritter will probably be at the Castle. Something evil is afoot. I feel it. Elsa was right when she said God did not dwell in your forest! You were right when you warned me of the evil reputation of the Försthaus and of the Baron! I must go to the Castle to-night."

"It may not be safe if things are as you fear. Do not be in too great a hurry, Herr Eager. I am afraid it is your failing. You were in a hurry once where the Fräulein Elsa was concerned! Does not that teach you the need of circumspection, though of course, now, it is different, as she is your wife? Would it not be better to see your friend, Herr Brand, first?"

"Him? It is him I have injured and mistrusted. The Baron made me, but no! I will not make excuses. My own blindness and jealousy made me!"

"Then your duty is to ask his pardon."

"But I cannot do so yet, till I know all that has happened. Besides, there is not time. Elsa is in need -in peril!"

"Herr Brand may help you to aid her. He has seen the Ritter von Geroldseck! He sent me to fetch him, and they spoke together for twenty minutes. I do not know what passed, but the Ritter looked tormented when he left the house. Herr Brand will tell you about it, better than I can. I will go with you to him, if you wish. I was going there, when you came!"

"Very well! Let us go!" said Raymond decisively. Then, turning to his mother, he added, "Shall you mind waiting here, mater, or will you stay at the hotel, while I go with Father Salomo to see Jermyn Brand. He has seen Elsa's father, it appears, and can probably tell me what is best to do. I have wronged him bitterly."

"I was sure of it, Ray! I knew him too well to think for one moment, that he could have had anything to do with Elsa's flight. And, my boy, I can only repeat that I am equally sure Elsa's flight was an innocent flight. You were too good and kind, for any woman to be able to wrong you, and Elsa was too simple and natural to deceive you."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do, Ray! We have all wronged her. As Mr. Brand himself said to me, the burden of our social system was too heavy for a poor child, brought up as she was. I see, now, how difficult our life must have been to her. I still think it was a pity she was brought away from these backwoods, but, if you win her back, Ray, I will try and be more considerate to her. I treated her wrongly, because I did not understand her. But where is she?—With her father?"

"Most probably!" said Raymond, with a gulp. "But I must see Jermyn Brand, before I go to her."

"Take me to the hotel, then, Ray, and I will wait there for you. But, please, my dear boy, promise me you won't run into danger. Don't be impetuous and do keep your temper! That Baron, you know..."

"Don't be anxious, mater. Jermyn will see that I don't act rashly. Father Salomo, too, is an epitome of prudence. But Elsa... Oh, I must rescue Elsa! Every moment may be a dead loss!"

V.

ONCE more, Father Salomo and Gottlieb sat in the outer room of the latter's house, while Jermyn Brand held private converse with a visitor.

The artist had now been moved from the mattress on the floor, to a bedstead, on which he was half effaced beneath an enormous feather-quilt. His voice was stronger, however, and he was more on a level with his visitor's ear.

Raymond sat on a chair by the bedside, holding Brand's hand in his. The friendly clasp seemed a foretaste of the greater reconciliation with one dearer than a friend, which, he fondly hoped was imminent, for Eager was still young enough to have that optimistic temperament, which arises from a sort of crude faith in one's own immunity from the evils that befall others. It is, in some ways, a happy disposition of nature, that most young people look upon themselves as the spoilt children of Destiny, simply from their instinctive conviction of their own importance.

Even Jermyn Brand unintentionally encouraged this idea.

"No excuses, Ray!" said Brand. "And please don't ask my pardon. As I told you at the door of the cottage that night at Swangate, I quite understood how it all came about. You were hardly responsible for what you said or did. You always were so fatally impetuous and given to jumping to conclusions, almost as bad as a woman. But I was determined to befriend you in spite of yourself, if only because I knew you were too excited to help yourself. That was why I watched the Baron von Wolfenheim and followed him and Elsa, when they left Swangate."

"They did go away together, then?"

"Yes, but don't jump to a wrong conclusion a second time. Your wife had no idea of wronging you. I am sure of it. Like yourself, she was simply overwrought and hardly knew what she was doing. She felt that you did not understand her, nor she you, that she was out of place, or, in scientific terms, out of harmony with her environment. Like a wounded animal, her one idea was to creep home, without paying heed to the means by which she got there. Well, I followed, or rather accompanied them to London. I wanted to telegraph from there, but it was Sunday, most of the offices were shut, and I could not let them out of my sight. Finally, I came on and crossed the Channel with them. Knowing your wife's ignorance of locality, the Baron took a circuitous route, Paris first, then northwards to Brussels, thence to Louvain and Aix la Chapelle, then Cologne and Coblenz, and so on to Bad Fich-

telstein. It was no joke of a journey, I can assure you, in winter."

"But why have done all this for me, considering...?"

"It wasn't *all* for you, perhaps not even half. I wanted to help your wife as well, and I also wanted to run the Baron to earth. Besides, once one starts on the amateur detective lay, the fascination is so great, one cannot stop."

"I'm sure your motive was a nobler one than that!"

"Perhaps! I don't quite know. Possibly it was my religion!"

"Your *religion*?"

"Yes! I haven't much, I'm afraid, but I can't help thinking that, whatever one's private faults, so long as one is kind to others, the Unseen Powers will be kind to oneself,—that is, if they are just, and I'm sure they are. Moreover, in this instance I felt that the Unseen Powers had to be propitiated, if one hoped to contend against the influences which, say what you like, were so manifestly at work."

"I know it, Jermyn! I felt them myself, that night... that awful night before Elsa left. I believed in Hell and the Devil, and every other thing that most people reject as superstition. But go on! How were you shot? Who did it?"

"I am not at liberty to say that, now, Ray! It is indeed of no consequence, as I'm getting better. All I can say is that the Baron out-manceuvred me. I was incautious, I'm afraid, and he must have seen me. Anyhow, he got here some hours in

advance and was able to give his version of what had happened!"

"His *per*-version you mean!"

"Exactly! But I didn't know he had seen me, and, being afraid of pursuing him openly in another sledge, I started off walking through the forest, trusting to luck and my legs, as I used to say, Both proved broken reeds, however, and here am I, now, another broken reed, except that I was able to telegraph to you."

"But Elsa! Surely her eyes must have been opened to the Baron's true purpose, once she got here, more especially as he took her to his own castle instead of to her father's house?"

"I expect she was utterly worn out by the journey, Ray, and the Baron had the excuse that, since she left, her father's place seems to have gone to wrack and ruin and to be hardly a fit shelter to take a dog to."

"Was her dog, Teufel, with her, by the way?"

"Yes! I was always afraid he would smell me out. He had a sort of liking for me. In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if the brute isn't responsible for my presence being discovered by the Baron. The poor creature seemed very excited at Bad Fichtelstein."

"Oh, he smelt his native place! That's all! But Father Salomo says you have seen the Ritter von Geroldseck."

"Yes! I sent for him in the hope that he would interfere to save his daughter, in case you did not come..."

"Oh, I would have come, in any case, as soon as I discovered she was here. Oh, Jermyn, I had often heard that a man never valued what he cared for till he lost it, but I never felt its truth till I lost Elsa."

"Few sayings of that kind do strike one as true, till they have a personal application. Even death seems incredible, till it comes, I suppose."

"Perhaps! But the Ritter, Jermyn?"

"It was no good, Ray. I couldn't make the man out. He seems fond of his daughter, but, for one thing, he has an idea that she was badly treated in England and has come back to escape from you and the rest of us."

"And the other?"

"Well! You remember what I told you I had discovered about our friend the Baron."

"The Devil-worship, you mean?"

Jermyn Brand nodded.

"And is he also...? Oh, Jermyn, is it possible? And Elsa is his daughter? And I am her husband! O God! This is frightful. What evil destiny ever brought me..."

"Hush, Ray! hush! Elsa—pardon my calling her so!—Elsa is not tarnished by it, nor are you!"

"But, Jermyn, my mother? I didn't tell you! The mater has come with me to help me. What will she say, even if I...? Oh! it is awful!"

"Ray, boy, remember the whitest, most spotless lilies grow on the foulest marshes. Elsa is such a lily?"

"But her own father! The people here were right then, when they talked of the Forest-House being evil, perhaps even when they said that my Elsa had a"

"Don't say the word, Ray! Remember what you yourself called her—the angel-girl! Besides, her father seems to regard it as a sort of philosophy,—a kind of one-sided Manichæism, making a deity of the principle of evil. That is why he will not interfere. He believes it to be a means of acquiring knowledge, what knowledge I don't quite know, but a sort of antidote to the materialism of civilization and a substitute for natural affection. The man seems sound at the core, but the husk is very cracked."

"Then do you think it is all merely superstition and hallucination?"

"The observances connected with it, such as that mark, may be; but Well! I can't explain it, Ray but people who go in for that sort of thing seem to have the power of *suggesting* evil."

"They have, Jermyn, they have! Even reading over that play of mine, I was horrified to see what suggestions had crept in, where the Baron helped me, even when the words and situations were quite innocent. But what's the use of talking of that now? The thing is Elsa . . . Elsa . . . Elsa!"

"What do you propose?"

"I am going to the Castle to-night. I wanted to go there direct, only Father Salomo persuaded me to come to you first. I'm glad I did, or I might have wasted time trying to get at the Ritter."

"You can't go alone, Ray!"

"He needs must whom the.... Baron drives!" said the other bitterly.

"Not the Baron, but your affection for Elsa, Ray! I wish I could go with you."

"So do I!"

"Perhaps Father Salomo will. A priest might be a good auxiliary under the circumstances. You ought to have another man with you anyhow! You must beware of the Baron picking a quarrel with you. He is an expert swordsman; at least, such was his reputation in Paris, so Vaszary told me. Call in the priest now and consult him. He knows the way about, better than we do."

Raymond went to the door.

VI.

"I HELPED you to win your wife, Herr Eager, so I am ready to help you to regain her. But caution...."

"O bother caution. Audacity carries the position by storm, while caution is considering how to besiege it."

"But even then, strategy is necessary! It is no use going up to the Schloss like a herald to demand surrender. The Herr Baron would laugh in your face. The walls will not fall at the sound of any man's trumpet."

"Father Salomo is right there, Ray!" observed Brand.

"Then, remember, we go to war with the powers of darkness, as well as with astute flesh and blood, At least, such is my own opinion!"

"But do you really think...?"

"Meinherr, I *know*! I will not sit in judgment on anybody, but I am as sure, as that we are in this room, that the Baron von Wolfenheim seeks the aid of evil forces, which we cannot see. You remember the story I told you, Herr Raimund, of how Father Habingsreiter saw lights at the castle, and,

when he knocked, they disappeared. That sounds a mere folk-tale,—a piece of superstition, and in itself it is, I admit, of no moment; but it is by such manifestations, that souls are entrapped. Bear with me, while I tell you my opinion, nay! more, my conviction. A man leads a vicious life: he puts himself out of harmony with the Eternal Goodness; he unfits himself for the exercise of religion, in its highest form, the worship of the All-powerful and All-perfect. For a time, he takes refuge in Nature, seeks to identify himself with the material and professes to believe only in the material. But all the while, stifle the feeling as he may, he is conscious of a longing for something that is above the material, the Something that is outside of Nature, yet in which all Nature is, the Something that is yet in man,—the impalpable essence, the well-spring of thought, that we call Soul. That soul knocks and clamours at the door of its fleshly prison, and cannot be quieted, even though we pretend to deafen our ears and harden our hearts. Ach! My friends, no man has ever yet uttered what he heard in the cry of his own soul, that poor soul which we persecute so bitterly and stifle so relentlessly. You meet a man in the street and talk to him as you talk to a stranger, of the weather, of politics, of the latest gossip. You greet a man even as a friend, and think you are admitted to his most sacred confidences. But what do you know really of that man? The outward world is so material, that he is ashamed and you are ashamed to talk of spiritual experiences,

for fear of being laughed at, or despised as a hypocrite. But I have been at many death-beds, I have seen men and women when the veil of flesh is torn asunder, and then you begin to learn what man really is. Show me the man who has not had at least one spiritual experience, however faint, not passed at least one moment, when, as if by a flash of lightning, he saw something outside of and beyond the seeming purposelessness of all the commonplace incidents of daily life and ordinary intercourse. Perhaps he has lost a dearly-loved mother, the one friend whose sympathy seems as wide and mercy as deep, as those of the All-Merciful. What does he feel when at night he ponders on his loss, and realises the terror of his separation,—that if he were to walk the earth for all eternity, he would never hear her voice, or feel her kiss again? In such a loss, does not Spirit cry out against Matter? Yet, next morning he goes about his business and his friends do not notice anything different. 'He is such a cheery, matter-of-fact man,' say they! 'One would think he never had a sorrow!' Or again, in the silent watches of the night, even perhaps by his best-beloved's side, comes some memory of secret sin, something he had never thought much about before, but suddenly he has a terrible vision of its evil. Quickly he covers it up, he turns to his wife, or thinks of his children, or of some business on which he is engaged. The thing is too painful to dwell upon. Besides, the actualities of the present claim his attention. But, in that

moment, he has heard his soul speak, has heard the spirit beating against the bars of matter. Some men's whole lives, then, seem spent in stifling the call of their soul, It is a painful sound, an annoyance to their rest and self-satisfaction. But there are others, whose spirit is strong, and whose longing for the supernatural must be gratified, wrongly if not rightly. Such people have not patience to wait for the time when all veils shall be removed, and we shall both hear and see things, as they are. Some are contented with manifestations and jugglery, but these are the weaker ones. The master-minds, the intellects greedy of knowledge, are more daring. They have lost the power of faith in the supernatural, and, therefore, they fall back upon the preternatural. Of such, in my opinion, are the Herr Baron and perhaps the Ritter von Geroldseck. How these powers are worked we cannot explain, but there are influences round us, which, if we do not keep them at bay by humble trust and charitable work, will even enter into us and make us their instruments. Ach! Evil is terribly complaisant. It beckons us like an old friend. To some it holds out pleasure, to others knowledge. But once we yield ourselves to its guidance, it makes a fool and a plaything of us. That is why the votaries of Satan always practise observances, more ridiculous and also more horrible, than any so-called religious superstition. Cards and fortune-telling, and such follies, to begin with, and then acts of horror performed in mad frenzy as acts of adoration to the Supreme Evil.

Meine Herren, this is no fable which I am telling you! Yonder in the forest is a ruined chapel—you know it, Herr Raimund?—the Augustin-kapelle. It once was consecrated. No Mass is said there now, but at night, in summer, people have assembled to celebrate the Mass of the Devil. You have read or heard what that is; of the Cross turned upside down and spat upon, of the Cup mixed of wine and brandy to intoxicate those who drink of it, of the mad orgies which follow. It is not fit to describe! People cannot believe that such things take place! It insults the human intellect, but it is precisely the pride of the human intellect that is punished by such absurdities. Therefore, I say, that in going to Schloss Wolfenheim, we are going to war with the powers of darkness.”

The priest stopped, and there was a sound of sobbing in the room. It was Raymond.

No sermon that he had ever heard had moved him so deeply as this impromptu homily from Father Salomo, sitting by the side of a sick bed in this dimly lighted room in the lonely, snow-shrouded house of a German peasant.

The priest seemed to have taken a scalpel and laid bare his quivering nerves. He saw his own littleness, as he had never seen it before, and the very air seemed full of strange overpowering presences.

Jermyn Brand, though not so profoundly moved, was very impressed; but he thought of the essential greatness of man in being able to combat evil.

"Come! Come, Ray!" said he. "This will never do! You are not a woman."

"No, Jermyn, I know! But fancy me, a poor, little, feeble, butterfly man like me, brought into contact with all this. Oh, I have never understood what life is! There they are at Swangate, or in London, living out their little trivial round, talking the gossip or the shibboleth of the day, as if it were the gospel of the universe; enjoying their little pleasures as if they were historical events; grumbling at the tiniest troubles, as if they were unequalled woes; sitting on their mole-heaps and gazing round at the view, as if they sat on mountain peaks. I have never felt before that life is *real!* I have never understood before that feelings are forces, that the only true thing in my life was my love for Elsa! And now to think of her... *there!* But, hang it all, I must go now and rescue her! I want to fight for her, to oppose something tangible, that I can strike, that can strike me back, not these vague nightmare terrors. I only hope the Baron does fight. Nothing would be a greater relief to me."

He spoke in English and Father Salomo did not understand his words, but his action was expressive enough, and the priest laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, as if to calm him.

"I have alarmed you, I fear!" said he. "But the affair is no worse because I have told you. Rather is it better, for man fears a known danger less than an unknown one. I hinted all this to you

when you first came to Kreuzdorf, but then you scoffed and would not believe me, so I said no more. One cannot understand what one refuses to believe!"

"No! But Elsa..." stammered Raymond.

"I did not know her then. I only knew she lived in the forest and that the Herr Baron..."

The priest stopped abruptly and Raymond started.

"It is someone knocking at the outer door," said Jermyn Brand. "How loud and hollow it sounds in the stillness!"

All three men listened intently, as the knocking grew louder and more persistent.

"Probably, Gottlieb has fallen asleep!" said Father Salomo. "Ach! He moves now and gets off his chair! Hear the legs scrape on the tiles, as he pushes it back. Now he goes to the door. Is someone sick in the village, I wonder, and am I sent for?"

"I hope not, because I want you!" remarked Raymond.

"No! It is not for me. It is for Herr Brand. I heard the name!"

"For me?" Brand was beginning, when Gottlieb opened the door of communication between the outer and inner rooms, and announced:—"The Herr Baron's forester asks to see Herr Brand!"

"Elsa's father!" exclaimed Raymond. "What can have happened?"

"Let him enter!" said Jermyn Brand.

A moment later, Von Geroldseck advanced into the room, and closed the door behind him. Then

he turned, and, on beholding Raymond, stood motionless with surprise.

Tall; commanding; eagle-faced; the grey beard straggling over his chest; the moustache on his upper lip, stained yellow by much tobacco-smoke, now congealed by the frozen moisture of his breath; his boots and leggings of untanned hide, still crusted with patches of snow;—he might have posed as some messenger from an early Germanic tribe, come to parley with Roman officers by night.

“What makest thou here?” he asked of Raymond.

“I have come for Elsa!”

“But...?”

The Ritter glanced at Jermyn Brand.

“His presence here in friendliness,” said the latter, “is sufficient answer to the story told you by the Baron von Wolfenheim. That misunderstanding is cleared up, thank God! For once, at least, you see, the evil principle has been foiled!”

“But what does Herr Raimund want with Elsa?”

“She is my wife!” said Raymond.

“You mean you wish to exercise a legal right?”

“I love her!”

“Then why didst thou not make her happy?”

“Because I did not understand her, or even realise my own feelings or hers! I was like you, yourself. I did not see that love is the one safeguard against the power of evil.”

Father Salomo nodded approvingly.

“Herr Raimund is right, Ritter, though perhaps he gives too limited a meaning to the word love,—

non mulierum amor, sed caritas omnibus hominibus.

That is the conquering power!"

"Have you seen your daughter?" asked Brand, to prevent Father Salomo indulging in a second homily.

"No! I have not seen her! That is why I have come," answered Von Geroldseck.

"Not seen her!" exclaimed Raymond and Jermyn simultaneously.

"She is a prisoner! Day by day, I go to the Castle; day by day the Herr Baron makes excuse, she is wearied or not yet recovered from her journey. But to-night I am to see her!"

"To-night? Where?" asked Raymond.

"At the Schloss Wolfenheim! To-night she makes her choice between knowledge and Nature...."

"What knowledge? That evil...."

"The Master-Key!"

"*That?*" shouted Raymond. "You mean she really is to join that abominable sect, to be vowed to evil, to...! Oh! It is too much! Jermyn, Father Salomo, do you hear? Are you a father or a devil incarnate? Can you remain here.... talk calmly... stand by with folded arms... do nothing... see your daughter murdered and outraged? But she is not your daughter! She cannot be! You..."

He walked up and down the room gesticulating.

"Be calm, Ray!" urged Brand.

"Calm! Yes, I will be calm.... after the storm perhaps, not before! Come, Father Salomo, we will go at once."

"You will not be admitted!" said the Ritter.
"No one is admitted to-night without the pass-word."

"What is the pass-word?"

"I cannot tell thee! But I will go with thee, and then thou canst enter with me!"

"Do you mean it?"

"If thy love for Elsa is strong enough to brave..."

"To brave the Devil himself!"

"Be cautious!" said Father Salomo. "Perhaps it is a trick!"

The Ritter turned upon the priest with flashing eyes.

"Silence, priest!" he thundered. "I have come to save my daughter, not to confess to you! Hypocrite! You pretend to practise the good, and secretly you favour the same evil forces, as I have favoured, but openly. You profess a religion of love, but you act and teach a religion of hatred. You would make my Elsa a witch, a child of sin, as the priests called her mother before her. But silence! In this matter the power of the priest is nothing, but the power of love may be... something!"

"If you go, I will follow secretly, in case you need help!" whispered Father Salomo to Raymond.

The latter nodded and turning to the Ritter, said, "I am ready!"

"Have you not a long cloak to muffle your face?" asked the forester.

"Take mine, Ray!" said Brand. "That blue one hanging on the door!"

"Thanks! And will you ask the man of the

house to go along to the inn, and tell the mater not to be anxious and to go to bed!"

"I will certainly! That was kindly thought of!" And he added in German to the Ritter, "You did not know that Herr Eager's mother had come to fetch her daughter? You see, Elsa is well beloved, after all!"

The forester said nothing, but held out his hand and gave Jermyn's a wring, which expressed much more than many words could have told.

VII.

THE Ritter von Geroldseck strode ahead so swiftly, that Raymond, notwithstanding his impatience, had some difficulty in keeping pace with him.

Not a word was exchanged, and the silence was only broken by the crunch of their boots on the frozen snow, and the sound of their hard breathing.

For a moment as they surmounted a rising ground, Raymond thought he caught a distant glimpse of the lights of Schloss Wolfenheim, but he was not sure, and from that point onwards, the way lay through the forest-aisles, where nothing was visible but the interminable files of the pine trees and the misty whiteness of the snowy ground.

He thought of his first walk through these same woods, when he had ascended the Tannenberg, and hesitated as to which route to choose. That hesitation had been the remote first cause of this present adventure. Destiny might well have given a grim chuckle.

But there was no hesitation now, and, presently, the goal came within hearing, though not in sight.

At first, Raymond thought the wind must have

risen, and glanced up at the branches of the trees, but, so far as he could see, they were motionless. His next idea was the distant baying of a wolf-pack, and he involuntarily quickened his steps, so as to come abreast of his companion.

"Dost thou fear?" asked the Ritter.

"No! But wolves might interrupt..."

"They are no wolves, but the wolves of Wolfenheim!" said the other bitterly. "I myself was one of that pack, till I saw my own lamb marked down as their quarry. Let us hurry! Faster, faster! The service has commenced. Listen to the chaunting!"

Raymond shuddered, as his ears were assailed by a long wailing sound, like the mourning of a multitude.

Therewith, they emerged on the broad platform before the main-gate of the castle, and Raymond saw light shining through the stained-glass window of the famous Rittersaal.

Avoiding the chief entrance, Von Geroldseck went along a narrow path beside the wall, till he came to the low door, which Father Salomo had told Raymond, was the Baron's private way.

He rapped thrice with his knuckles, saying to Raymond, "Conceal thy face, and do not speak!"

The other drew the cloak over his head to disguise himself.

The door was opened by Albrecht, the ancient servitor, to whom the Ritter murmured something, inaudible to Raymond.

They entered, and, as they crossed the courtyard, Raymond was surprised to notice the footmarks in the snow, as if quite a company of people had preceded them by the self-same way.

Passing by the well remembered door of the Raubthurm, the Ritter entered the main-building, and led Raymond through a narrow passage to a sort of tribune, the front of which was concealed by heavy curtains.

"The music gallery of the Rittersaal!" he whispered. "Remain hidden here till you think it is time to show yourself. In the centre, behind the curtain, is a staircase to the floor. I will be down there with the others, standing at the foot of the steps."

So saying, he went back along the passage, leaving Raymond alone. But Raymond felt the presence of many people behind the curtains. They were silent, but there was the same sense of stir as that caused by a congregation in church, a clearing of the throat, a stifled cough, a rustling of garments.

Cautiously drawing aside the edge of the curtain, he peered into the Rittersaal. Except for its general configuration, which he remembered, the hall seemed quite unfamiliar. All the armour had been removed, and the family pictures on the walls were blotted out by voluminous black hangings, bordered with red. At the end opposite to the music-gallery, was a dais, about eight inches higher than the floor level. On this, what resembled an altar had been erected, bearing the regulation six candlesticks, three on

either side of the centrepiece, which consisted of an inverted crucifix. The antependium of this pseudo altar was black, and, instead of the yellow or silver cross usual in Roman Catholic ceremonial, bore the mark,



worked in red. The same symbol appeared on the black carpet covering the dais, or sanctuary. Immediately in front of the dais, on a cleared space of the floor, was an oblong of black drapery, similar to that sometimes used in place of a catafalque at Masses for the dead. Such a pall is also used, though Raymond was not aware of the fact, when novices take their solemn vows, on entering religious life.

A service was in progress, and so far as Raymond could judge, it was an exact travesty of the ceremonial of the Mass. The priest wore a blood red chasuble, with a black bull's head contained in a triangle, embroidered in front, and a reversed cross, also black, on the back. He was attended by acolytes dressed in black cassocks and red surplices. One of them swung a thurible, apparently containing some pastille or oriental drug, for the faint, sweet, sickly odour diffused through the Rittersaal, was certainly not the pungent aroma of incense. But faint as it was, the smell was extremely penetrating and seemed to affect the brain, like fumes of strong wine.

The congregation consisted of some thirty persons. All wore long black cloaks so that their faces and even their sex were to a great extent concealed. But at least half of them seemed to be women, and, as far as he could catch a glimpse of the features, Raymond seemed to recognise faces which he had encountered in the village.

But the entire proceedings were invested with such a sense of unreality and mystery, that he could hardly conquer the conviction that the scene was a hallucination or a dream.

Moreover, an awful sense of misery suddenly invaded Raymond's mind, and he could scarcely keep from crying aloud.

In scriptural phrase, he seemed to realise the very 'abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the Holy Place'.

Horror, fear and all wickedness seemed to brood upon the place like a triune, living presence.

He had no doubt as to the character of the service of which he was a spectator. It was the Mass of the Devil, of which Father Salomo had spoken earlier in the evening, the Black Mass of the votaries of Satan. He shook with fear, yet every nerve tingled and he felt as electrified as if he had received the discharge from a Voltaic battery.

Outside, the forest, silence and snow! Inside, this terrible celebration, at which the quick sought to break through the barriers of the dead.

The celebrant, whether a mock-clergyman or a sacrilegious priest, was intoning an invocation, cor-

responding to the solemn prayer, known in the ritual as the Preface, from it immediately preceding the mystery of the Consecration.

“To Thee, great and mighty Adonay, Ruler of all Spirits, do we fly; to Thee, O Elohim, and to Thee, O Lucifer!

“To thee do we dedicate our Souls, our Hearts, our Hands, our Feet, our Sighs and Groans and the very Bowels of our whole Being!

“Emperor Lucifer, Prince and Ruler of all Rebelious Spirits, we implore thee now to quit thy Dwelling Place, and be graciously pleased to accept the Oblation which we offer to thy Name! O Prince of this World and Autocrat of the Empire of Evil, vouchsafe to hear our Prayer!”

So much did Raymond hear and understand of this invocation, spoken in the German tongue.

All those present said ‘Amen’, and straightaway, began again that doleful wailing, which Raymond had heard as he approached the Castle through the forest.

The wailing of the wolves of Wolfenheim, the Ritter von Geroldseck had suggested, but the description was weak and ineffective, compared to the reality.

It seemed the bitter cry of all the world, the outburst of all the stifled remorse of the generations of man, a bitter, hopeless sound, yet a ring of revolt withal. It made Raymond feel inclined to lift up his head and howl like a dog.

Certain individuals in the congregation threw

themselves about in fantastic attitudes: others foamed at the mouth and blasphemed audibly; while many cried '*Komm, Lucifer, Komm! Erscheine!*'

Suddenly the priest turned and stood with his back to the altar, and the tumult subsided as quickly as it had arisen.

"Brethren," said the celebrant, "we have assembled here to-night for the solemn reception and initiation into the nameless mysteries of our knowledge, of a sister long since dedicated to our Master, but whom circumstances have prevented from vowing herself to his service. We can offer no more pleasing oblation to him, than that of a young and beautiful woman, for it is chiefly by such that his mission is executed in the world and his behests are fulfilled. As in the false Christian worship, so in our true worship, she shall lie under that pall, as a sign that she renounces Heaven, and whatever she shall there wish, it shall be granted her, and whatever she shall desire to know, it shall be given her to know. And she shall be baptised with blood, and her spiritual father in Lucifer, shall be our noble arch-deacon and magister, the most wise and adept Gunther, Baron von Wolfenheim!"

Raymond breathed hard.

At last the moment had come.

The congregation began to wail anew, but this time, their tone was one of bitter triumph.

From beneath the music gallery, three people advanced towards the altar.

One was the Ritter von Geroldseck. He took

his stand near the gallery staircase. The other two were the Baron von Wolfenheim and Elsa. Her face was pale, her lint white hair strayed loosely over her shoulders, and her eyes had the fixed, intense look of a sleep-walker.

She looked so beautiful, yet so helpless, that Raymond felt for a moment as if someone had gripped him by the throat.

Then, he sprang down the gallery steps, rushed across the hall, and clasped her in his arms, shouting, "Elsa! Elsa! O thank God!"

Instantly all was confusion.

The cloaked figures of the congregation darted away in every direction, extinguishing any lights they happened to pass, as they made for the doors. The candles on the altar were overturned by the acolytes, and the pseudo-priest disappeared. In a few moments, the Rittersaal was in complete darkness.

Raymond held Elsa tightly in his arms, and she clung to him like a creeper to a tree-stem.

Somebody tried to separate them, and to throw a cloth over his head. He resisted as well as he could. Then someone else seemed to come to his aid, and he heard a blow, like that of a fist on naked flesh.

Then, silence and darkness!

After that a guttural whisper, "Hold my hand and follow me, or all the doors of exit will be closed against us!"

A scramble up the staircase to the music-gallery; a stealthy race through dark passages; then the cold

air upon the heated face and the crisp snow under foot.

A scurry across the courtyard to the main entrance ; a muttered oath from Von Geroldseck when the door was found to be closed.

Back to the gate known as the Baron's private way: that also locked. Finally, Raymond standing defiantly against the wall, one arm round Elsa, whose head lay on his shoulder, the other arm ready for defence. The Ritter a few paces off expostulating with Albrecht, the servitor, for not unlocking the door.

Such was the swift action of a scene, which leaden-footed type is too heavy to portray!

VIII.

IT was the bitter hour before the winter's dawn. The frost seemed to crackle like burning faggots under a pot. The sky was clear, and the stars appeared to be shining nakedly, without any intervening medium of atmosphere. A white moon, shaped like a lop-sided egg, made the snow-crystals sparkle on the coping of the castle wall.

The Baron von Wolfenheim crossed the courtyard, carrying a lantern, which he set down close to where Raymond and Elsa were standing. There was a dark bruise on his cheek bone.

"Von Geroldseck!" said he. "Call away thy daughter! And, Albrecht, open the door that the Englishman may go out. He is trespassing!"

The servitor obeyed, but the Ritter answered. "I have no right to command my daughter. She is with her husband. See, Gunther, how she clings to him! Her coming with you was a misunderstanding! Let them go together! I...."

The Baron stamped his foot.

"Thou art her father, and she is under age!"

"That is no matter. The father's rights are

transferred to the husband, when she marries! But let them go! Dost thou want all the world to hear of...."

The Baron harshly interrupted.

"Albrecht!" said he. "Let loose the dog! Dogs are kept to guard houses from intruders."

He turned his head for a moment to watch the servant going towards the stable. In that moment, Raymond almost carrying Elsa, slipped through the open door on to the platform above the steep path leading down to the forest.

"Stop!" cried the Baron, springing after them.

"You may be justified in ordering us out of your castle," said Raymond, speaking as calmly as he could, "but here we are at liberty to go where we choose. It is a public path. You will be prosecuted for assault, if you touch me!"

"Prosecuted! Assault! This is not England! You cannot call a policeman! All this forest, as far as you can walk, is my demesne! But, I do not wish to harm you. I was your guest at Swangate."

"As the Devil is your guest at Schloss Wolfenheim! No, Baron, you have been foiled. It will be better for you to let us go quietly now!"

"Yes, Gunther, that will be best!" chimed in the Ritter, "Thou hast both husband and father against thee. Even if thou wert to use force, what is one man to two? And see, here comes a third!"

"The dog!"

There was a joyous bark and the hound Teufel came bounding out, and began fawning round Elsa.

"You had better let her go, or, the creature will fly at your throat!" said the Baron in English to Raymond. "What do you want here at all? It is like a jackal to wish for the leavings of the lions, like a dog to want something which he himself has left, just because he sees that others want it. Go away, my vrendt, go back to England and the clever, little Carew! I told you how it would be. Remember the story of the wild girl, the child of Nature, as our goodt vrendt Von Geroldseck would say, who stabbed her husband's honour! Well, in England there is divorce! Elsa left your home. Her platonic vrendt Herr Brand left at the same time. I also left at the same time. Elsa has been five days in the Castle already. *Also....*"

"Damn you, for a scoundrel!" said Raymond in English, between his teeth. "Do not hold me so tight, Elsa dearest! I cannot be quiet any longer. I would not love you, if I could submit to hear such insults. Yes, Baron, I remember the story you told me very well, and I remember you said that out here, there is only one way of settling such things. Honour cannot be paid for with money, only with...."

"Ach! That is what I want!" exclaimed the Baron. "Now, I hear a man speaking! Yes! Let us settle it that way, the only way between gentlemen, for as you are a foreigner, I overlook that you are not of noble blood. Albrecht! Bring two rapiers from the armoury! New ones!"

The last words were spoken in German.

"What has he been saying? Are you going to fight?" asked the Ritter anxiously.

"That is the only way out of it! He has insulted Elsa!"

"I fear for thee. He is an expert swordsman. But if thou fallest, I will stand in thy place. I will not dissuade thee from fighting, for it is better to fall with honour than live in dishonour."

The swords were brought. The Baron handed one to Raymond with a formal bow. He seemed quite cool and collected, now.

"Thy father will support thee, Elsa?" said Raymond, disengaging her arms from his.

"Ach! my Raimund, I am not worth bloodshed!" she whispered.

"But thy love and my honour are!"

She withdrew a few paces, and leaned against the wall of the castle, with her hand on the dog Teufel's back.

"There is not much space here," said the Baron, glancing at the narrowness of the ledge between the castle and the steep slope down to the forest. "But there is room enough to stretch a man."

He placed himself in an attitude of defence, standing firm as a rock, with a look bespeaking absolute mastery of his weapon and of the situation. Raymond threw off his cloak and tried to imitate the other's movements.

"Higher! Higher!" shouted Von Geroldseck. "He will be through your guard in one eye-blink, if you do not cover yourself better! *Lieber Gott!* How clumsily you hold the sword!"

"No matter, I will do my best! said Raymond, spurred to anger by very shame of his own incompetency.

He wondered for a moment, that Elsa, seeing how absolutely ignorant he was of the noble science of fence, did not seek to dissuade him from the unequal contest, but he did not know that she loved him too well to ask him to forego avenging his honour. The blood of knightly sires was commingled in her veins with the barbaric strain from Eastern plains. Her lover was more truly her lover, fighting for her, here on the snowy platform by the Schloss Wolfenheim, than ever he had been her husband in an English drawing-room. As once before in earlier days at the Försthaus, she murmured to herself "My noble knight!"

Von Geroldseck realised Raymond's incapacity, but he could not interfere between any man and his right to avenge himself of an insult. He had another reason, moreover, for not hindering the fight. He regarded it as a test.

"Ach! Now we will see! Now is the struggle between Right and Wrong!" he observed, as the rapiers flashed simultaneously in the starlight and met with a sharp click.

Raymond concentrated his attention on the combat, and warily watched his antagonist.

They exchanged three passes of courtesy; rested a moment, and then eyed each other, preliminarily to thrust and parry in deadly earnest.

The Baron smiled calmly and waited for Raymond

to open the attack, but the Englishman simply remained on his guard. Apparently annoyed by this inaction, the other made a sudden lunge, but Raymond successfully parried the stroke, and seeing his antagonist's guard open, leaned forward to thrust the steel into the Baron's breast.

"*Habet! Habet!*" shouted the Ritter.

But the thin steel bent as if it had come in contact with stone. The Baron made a volte aside, and his rapier darted out like a serpent's tongue, straight for Raymond's neck.

"Shame! Unknightly!"

These words from the Ritter.

But before they were uttered, something like a white shadow flitted between the combatants.

The rigid thrust went home: a stream of blood spouted along the virgin steel.

But it was not English blood, though Raymond staggered backwards from the violence of the blow.

"Pitiful God! He has struck Elsa!" muttered Von Geroldseck, his lips distending in a grin of sheer horror.

But another spectator had also noticed the ill fortune of the fight; a spectator, more whole-hearted in fidelity than either Elsa's father or her husband.

With a curve like a comet, the dog Teufel sprang full on the Baron's chest, the parted jaws closing with a snap on the bare throat, as the man fell backwards.

It was but a momentary spectacle,—the flash of a dropped rapier, which fell with a clang on the stone

steps; a quiver of impotent outstretched hands with clenched fingers; a flurry of animal's hair, red gullet and uncovered teeth; a quick vision of an awful face with rolling eyes, purpling cheeks, and protruding tongue!

Then Baron and dog fell over the steep bank, and rolled together to the snow slopes beneath.

At this moment, a man emerged from the forest at the foot of the rough stair-way to the Castle.

"*Lieber Gott!* The Teufel is throttling the Herr Baron!" he shouted.

"Let be, priest!" rang the guttural voice of the Ritter from the platform above. "Love is avenged, though Evil has triumphed."

IX.

THE moon looked pale and indistinct now. The stars were gone, and the sky had an electric blue radiance, which was reflected from the untrodden snow. Elsa lay on the ground on the cloak, which Raymond had borrowed from Jermyn Brand. An attempt to move her had only provoked a fresh flow of blood.

How vividly scarlet the life-streams looked in that chill dawnlight, when all the landscape was etched in silver-point!

Raymond remembered the night of his home-coming at Swangate, the interrupted dinner-party and the blood stains on the bride's white dress. Now as then, the dog Teufel presently came bounding back, his jaws slavering red. At first, the creature kept its tail, proudly high, but when it put its nose to the streaks in the snow on the platform, it lifted its head and began to howl most piteously. Father Salomo followed the creature up the steps, wringing his hands and exclaiming, "Ach! Nothing could be done! He must have broken his neck in the fall, and the dog has torn his throat in pieces?"

"For God's sake, stop its howling!" said Raymond

petulantly, forgetting that his hearers only understood German.

But they understood what he meant, for comprehension is swift in times of crisis.

The Ritter shouted a word to Albrecht, the servitor, who still stood by the Castle gate. He ran inside and presently emerged with a gun.

"No! Not that!" exclaimed Raymond. "It is Elsa's dog!"

But his words were drowned by the sharp report of the weapon.

Elsa opened her eyes at the sound, but evidently did not comprehend its import, and seeing Raymond's face bent above her, faintly smiled.

"Angel! It is nothing! Do not disturb yourself! Are you easier now?" said he, hardly knowing what he was saying and speaking more by instinct than will, though every commonplace word seemed squeezed from his heart, like drops of gall from a sponge.

The wound was in her neck, and Raymond kept trying to staunch the blood with handfuls of snow, but the primitive styptic melted almost immediately it was applied.

"It's all right, darling!" he went on murmuring in English, with as little sequence or logic, as a mother hushing a sick child. "Soon be better! There! The bleeding is getting less already! Dearest love! Never mind!"

Meanwhile Father Salomo turned to the Ritter von Geroldseck.

"Wilt thou not have her made a child of God, now?" he asked.

"What need?" grumbled the other. "She is one, if God is love!"

"She is in the natural sense, but as she was marked outwardly with that terrible brand of evil, let us now wash that out in the waters of baptism."

"Ask her husband! I have no right to speak!"

"Shall I not now baptise her?" said the priest accordingly to Raymond.

"Why?" asked Eager vaguely. "She is pure as an infant."

"Yet we baptise infants, especially in danger of death."

"She is not in danger of death. It is merely faintness from loss of blood. But do as you like, only don't disturb her!"

Father Salomo gathered some snow in the hollow of his hand, and let it remain there till it melted.

"What name?" he asked.

"Angel!" murmured Raymond, still continuing his crooning over Elsa.

The priest poured the snow-water on Elsa's brow, saying, "I baptise thee Angelika, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost."

At contact with the cold water, the girl again opened her eyes, with the old, wide, rapt expression that Raymond knew so well. A divine gaze of love and tenderness seemed to enfold and kiss Raymond's very soul, and he felt as if her being

had melted into his—a poignant rapture in the midst of an agony!

“Oh *Liebchen*, forgive all my cruelty!”

She tried to speak.

Raymond caught the words ‘England’, ‘return’, ‘Antonia Carew’, ‘loves’, ‘understand’; then, more distinctly, “Herr Brand is right. Love is goodness!”

Her eyes began to glaze and her face was far whiter than her lint-white hair. Tears that would not fall scalded Raymond’s eyes, and almost prevented him seeing her, as he bent closer and closer to her face, yet all the while feverishly staunching the wound with snow.

“Speak! Speak to me! Just once more, dear one! Only say good-bye!”

A faint whisper. It may only have been fancy.

“Friends never say that. Friends say *Auf wiedersehen!*”

Then a tired sigh, the supreme effort which sent the last hot blood gushing over Raymond’s ice-cold fingers.

At that moment was borne through the still air, the mellow sound of a bell from the far-off valley of Kreuzdorf.

“It is the Angelic Salutation!” said Father Salomo. Let us pray! *Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae.*”

“*Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto!*” was the response.

The priest looked round, for he knew that Ray-

mond was not of his faith. The answer came from the Ritter von Geroldseck, who was kneeling on the snow by the side of Elsa's body, his head bared, his eyes streaming tears over his grey beard. He had not said that prayer since he was a boy at his mother's knee.

The prayers being concluded, Father Salomo touched Raymond on the shoulder. "Come!" said he. "There is yet much to be done, and your mother will be anxious. See, there are people from the village coming. No doubt she or Herr Brand has sent them."

Raymond looked up as if dazed.

Then he replied suddenly, "Wait one moment."

Therewith he rolled back the sleeve of Elsa's dress.

The mark had faded.

POSTSCRIPT.

CHILDREN always want to know 'what happened afterwards.'

We, children of larger growth, are often conscious of such a desire, but those of us who have learned wisdom by experience, know that few ideals can stand the test of time. Therefore we restrain ourselves from enquiring too curiously into the sequel of things.

But for such as prefer to follow the actors home and see them take their supper and go to bed, this postscript is appended.

The scattered words about Swangate that fell from Elsa's lips near the end, were doubtless a prophecy. For, when the judicial enquiry held at Bad Fichtelstein was over, and every incident described in the preceding pages, had been satisfactorily accounted for on matter-of-fact legal lines, Raymond returned to Swangate with his mother. They allowed it to be understood that Elsa had died suddenly in Germany, and Raymond was the object of much sympathy. One only suspected a deeper tragedy. That one was Antonia Carew, and her sympathy