

ARLO BATES

ALBRECHT

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Albrecht

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FORE-WORD

It must be evident to the most careless observer that the treatment of the theme with which the present story deals would probably not have taken the form it has, had "Undine" not been written before it; but it is to be hoped that "Albrecht" will not on that account be set down as an attempt either to imitate or to rival that immortal romance.

No effort has been made to secure historical exactness, as the intent of the tale was wholly independent of this. To furnish a picture of the times was not in the least the thing sought.

A romance can hardly fall into a more fatal error than to attempt the didactic, and there is no intention in the present story of enforcing any moral whatever; and yet the problem which lies at the heart of the tale is one which is of sufficient significance in human life to furnish a reasonable excuse for any book which, even without contributing anything to its solution, states it so that it appeals to the reader until he recognizes its deep import.

I

HOW ONE WENT

Like a vast sea the mighty Schwarzwald stretched its forests of pine and its wide wastes of heather around Castle Rittenberg, its surface forever fretted into waves by the wind. Like the sea it seemed measureless, and the lands which lay beyond its borders appeared to the scattered dwellers in its valleys as remote as might appear the continents to the people of far islands.

Like the sea, moreover, the Schwarzwald was peopled by strange beings, of whom alike the peasant folk who dwelt upon its borders, the rude churls whose huts stood here and there in clusters in its less intractable nooks, and the nobles whose castles overtopped the wilderness of trees and bracken, went always in secret dread. In the north lurked the hordes of the Huns, the terrible barbarians who from time to time descended, hardly human, upon the fertile lands which lay beyond the borders of the forest, swarming as they went upon whatever luckless castle lay in their path. The boldest knight might well tremble at the name of the ferocious Huns, and even the army of Charlemagne himself had hardly been able to cope with this foe.

But more near at hand, and more terrible than even the Huns, were the strange creatures who abode in the forest, and who walked invisible at their will, the mysterious beings who lurked in dim recesses, and of whom men spoke only in awe-struck whispers. Even what they were it was not easy to say; and who could tell how they were offended or how to be placated? The nixies of the lakes and streams; the dwarfs and gnomes of cave and mountain; the kobolds, who were more daring and more human in appearance than either, so that haply a man might endanger not only his life but even his soul holding commerce with them, unsuspecting that they were not of his fellow mortals, – all these and many others dwelt in the shadowy recesses, and against these not even the hosts of the Great Emperor would avail.

The wind sighing all day in the pine-trees, and the weird, sweet music of the elfin harps which belated wanderers heard sounding to lure them on into blinder depths of the wood, seemed to sing the same song; but its mystery human ears might not fathom, and scarcely could human will resist its spell. In the tempest the bugles of the Wild Huntsman pealed shrilly through the storm, and the retainers at Castle Rittenberg crossed themselves at the sound almost as openly as did the damsels; but there was less danger in this than in the heavenly sweet strains which beguiled the wayfarer into forgetfulness of home and of dear ones until he joined himself to the soulless folk of the forest, and was heard of no more.

It was music of this sort, more sweet than words might tell, faint on the air as the breath of a sigh or yet again swelling full and strong as a blast from the horns when the hunt is rushing through the wood, that had of late been heard around the castle. Delicious, enervating, seductive and yet pleading, the strange melodies had seemed to surround the towers, as if throngs of invisible musicians floated in the air to bring their heavenly minstrelsy to the Countess Erna.

There had indeed been more than one token that something mysterious was forward in the forest; and although the priest of Rittenberg frowned upon all talk of the wood-spirits and their doings, the folk of the castle whispered under their breath many a wild surmise.

Mayhap it was of these things that the Countess Erna dreamed as one spring morning she sat by her open lattice, albeit she had before her a parchment from which she might be reading. From below arose the noise of horses' hoofs, the cries of grooms and pages, the clatter of spurs upon the stone pavement, and all the sounds that betoken the preparation of a troop to leave the castle. So little did she heed, however, that she seemed not to hear. So motionless was she that the doves which had perched upon the wide window-ledge in perfect fearlessness had ceased to regard her at all, and

preened themselves in the sun with soft, full-throated cooings, contrasting oddly with the clamor which arose from below.

The morning sun shone gloriously, casting a flood of light through the room; and although Erna sat withdrawn from the fervor of its direct rays, she seemed to glow in the radiance like a lily golden-hearted. Her hair, yellow as the flax on a fairy's distaff, caught a stray sunbeam which stole through a crevice in the curtain-folds, and scattered the light in a hundred reflections, making of them an aureole about the graceful young head. The eyes, blue as an oker-bell, were now and then raised from the richly illuminated parchment before her, absently regarding the doves as if she saw them not, while the slender hands which held the scroll were only a little warmer in their color than the robe of snowy wool loosely confined at the waist with a golden girdle. As she sat there in the still chamber, withdrawn from the bustle of the courtyard below in mind no less than in place, there was about the countess an atmosphere of peace, of innocence, of purity, one might almost have said of holiness, that he must be dull indeed who could not feel, or who, feeling, failed to reverence.

There was little reverence, however, in the mien of the old dame who came hastily into the chamber, and broke in upon the reading and the dreaming of the Countess Erna with exclamations full of vexation.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" she cried. "Thou sittest here reading as quietly as if thy suitor, Count Stephen, were a thousand leagues away instead of waiting below to take leave of thee. No wonder that he declares that thou hast not a drop of warm blood in thy body, as his squire reported to my damsel."

"Count Stephen is no suitor of mine," Erna responded calmly, "as no one knoweth better than thou, Aunt Adelaide. He is my guest, however, and I should be loath to fail in aught of courtesy toward him. Why have I not been summoned if he be in truth waiting?"

"Well, if he be not waiting," the old dame replied with a lower voice and some softening of manner, "he is at least ready to set out, and that is much the same thing. It would certainly look more attentive on thy part shouldst thou be in the hall when he comes to take leave rather than to wait to be sent for."

"Doubtless; but I have no wish to be attentive to Count Stephen beyond the claim of any guest."

"But Count Stephen is a member of the family."

"His connection is hardly near enough to count in this matter," Erna answered. "Dear Aunt," she continued, coming closer to the other, and laying a caressing hand lightly upon the old woman's arm, "I am sorry that thou shouldst be disappointed. I did what I could to fulfil thy wish when I bade thee have Count Stephen come here, although what we had heard of him was so little of the sort to make me long for such a guest, because I knew that more than for aught else in the world thou didst long for the perpetuation of the Von Rittenberg name by my becoming his wife. I shrank from the knight from the first moment I saw him, and never could it be that I should be brought to look upon him with favor. Happily he feels the same repugnance to me, so that I am spared the pain of telling him nay; but I cannot fail to be glad at his departure."

The old dame, who was so small and so old that she seemed to have shrivelled away in long centuries, overlooked and forgotten by the Angel of Death, was evidently moved by the caressing air of the countess; but her grievance was too deep and of too long standing to be so lightly passed over, and she could not restrain herself from the further venting of her displeasure.

"Why does he feel cold toward thee?" she demanded. "Hast thou been other than an ice-hill to him since he entered the castle? I sent for Count Stephen to come here to pay his respects to me because he is the only man alive who bears our name; and whatever thou mayst say, he bears it like a brave knight. Thou hast met him as if thou wouldst remind him that while he hath no great possessions thou art chatelaine of the richest domain in the Ober-Schwarzwald."

"Aunt Adelaide!" interrupted Erna, a flush of indignation rising in her clear cheek, "not even thou hast a right to charge me with insulting my guests."

"God's blood!" the other returned. "There spoke thy father, Heaven rest his soul! But thou knowest," she continued, softening her tone, "that I cannot live forever to have care for thee, and that I cannot die easy till thou art well wed. There are strange rumors in the air, too, and who knoweth what the music from the forest that has been heard of late may betoken? And Elsa tells me that there hath been about the place a weird creature in the guise of a man who walketh limpingly. It all bodes some wonderful thing that is to hap, and I would to the saints that Rittenberg had a man to defend it, whatever may befall."

The entrance of a servant who announced that the Count von Rittenberg was now in truth waiting to take leave, interrupted Lady Adelaide, and brought her at once to a request which had been in her shrewd mind ever since she learned that the guest was likely to set off without having made that proffer for the hand of Erna to secure which she had invited him to the castle.

"At least this thou canst do to please me," she said; "thou canst invite him to rest here on his way back from Strasburg, whither he is journeying."

"It will be idle for thy project, Aunt," the countess answered kindly; "but if it will please thee I will do it."

The old aunt looked after the slender maiden as she left the chamber, and sighed. The Lady Adelaide was almost a century old, and she had lived to see one generation after another fall around her like snowflakes that are a moment in the air and then are seen no more. She felt that upon her rather than upon her niece rested the burden of preserving the honor of the house of Von Rittenberg, and she could but feel keenly the failure of her schemes for the perpetuation of the line and the name. She had been accustomed, moreover, to being obeyed. For three generations she had held an important place in the councils of the family, even her imperious grand-nephew, the father of the Countess Erna, having been accustomed to consult her in matters of importance. She was not without a feeling of indignant surprise that her plans should be disregarded, and perhaps this helped her to endure the genuine sorrow which she felt whenever she thought of the possibility of the failure of the family name.

The late count had fallen fighting in the place of honor in the advance guard of the Great Emperor, at the head of the corps of Suabians whose valor inspired in Charlemagne so warm an admiration. So high had Count von Rittenberg stood in the favor of the emperor that a special messenger had been despatched by Charlemagne's order to bear the knight's sword and shield to his family with rich tokens of the royal favor and expressions of sympathy. But not even this great honor could prevent the shock from breaking the heart of his young wife, just recovering from the birth of her first child, the present countess; and Erna was thus left doubly orphaned while yet in her cradle.

During her infancy and girlhood Erna had been under the guardianship of the Lady Adelaide, who seemed to hold the infirmities of age at bay with a success little short of a miracle. The retainers believed her to be in possession of some secret by means of which she preserved her vigor; and many were the uncanny whispers which circulated through the castle concerning her. Father Christopher, the chaplain of the Von Rittenberg household, had more than once set himself to combat these rumors; but the Lady Adelaide herself never exhibited any annoyance if she chanced to hear them hinted at, and indeed seemed not ill-pleased that she should enjoy a reputation which so lifted her above the rest of her fellow mortals.

The marriage of Erna and Count Stephen von Rittenberg was a project which had long occupied the thoughts of the Lady Adelaide. The count belonged to a younger branch of the family which had settled near the Lake of Constance half a century before, and lorded it over a petty colony of boatmen whose settlement was called Schaffhausen from their boat-sheds. There had never been very cordial relations between the two branches, and Count Stephen would never have been sought out by his aged relative had not her desire to perpetuate the Von Rittenberg name overcome her traditional scorn of the "Schaffleute," as the Schaffhausen Von Rittenbergs were contemptuously called by the elder branch. The count had a reputation not of the best, it was unhappily true; but he was at least a Von

Rittenberg, and that outweighed all other considerations in the mind of the old matchmaker. She had invited him to visit her, taking care that he should understand that he was to be considered in the light of a possible candidate for the hand of the heiress of Rittenberg, and it was with sincere regret as well as vexation that she saw her scheming come to naught.

From the first the repulsion had been mutual between the countess and her guest. He was by no means insensible to the advantages of the match, which offered him the lordship of the richest holding in all the Schwarzwald, confirmed to the Von Rittenbergs by special decree of Charlemagne himself, but he was a man accustomed to consider his inclinations in all things and first of all things; so that when he found the countess not to his liking, he pushed the affair no further. He was a man to whom life meant sensuous pleasure; and Erna, in her white innocence, her purity and devotion, failed to please him. He found her cold and tediously religious, and instinctively felt that the presence of a wife with her standards of conduct would be a perpetual rebuke to his pleasure-loving life.

On her side Erna shrank from the count without understanding why. The taint of evil was on him, and her pure maidenly sense was offended without comprehending how. She felt in a way degraded by his very presence; the bold, curious looks with which he regarded her affected her like an affront. Her instinctive purity was repelled by the sensual atmosphere which he created wherever he came. She could not have explained even to herself what she felt, but it was impossible for her to endure his presence save by the strongest effort. It was with a feeling of relief that she passed down the long hall to say good-by to him; and even the fact that she had promised her aunt to ask him to return did not at the moment trouble her, since his return seemed too uncertain and remote to weigh against the present departure. The Lady Adelaide, with a diplomacy which was wholly wasted, had herself taken leave of Count Stephen earlier, to the end that her niece might receive his farewell alone.

There was short speech between the guest and his hostess, neither of whom wished to prolong the interview; and hardly ten minutes from the time she had left it, Erna re-entered her chamber. She took up the scroll she had been reading, a copy of the writings of Saint Cuthbert, but paused before she opened it to look out at the train of the departing guest, which was already in motion. She watched it cross the drawbridge and wind down the side of the hill upon which the castle stood; and after it had vanished, with its glitter of armor, flash of helmet, gay flutter of pennant and waving of plumes, into the obscurity of the pine forest below, which swallowed up the troop and hid its further progress from sight, she leaned wistfully upon the window-ledge, buried in thought. She was wondering if she were different from other maidens, that her heart had not been touched, but that she had rather been repelled by the handsome knight who had just left her; and she half doubted whether he had not been right in likening her to a human iceberg.

Suddenly her reverie was broken by the shrill, clear blast of a horn, which arose from the pine wood below, and came soaring upward like the piercingly sweet song of a bird that pours its whole heart out singing and straining its flight toward the blue heaven.

The sound broke in upon her reverie as if it were a summons from some of the mysterious powers whose home was in the forest. Often as she had heard a bugle hailing the warder of Rittenberg, it had never happened that there had come with the sound such a thrill as this call brought. Far stretched and weird the great Schwarzwald lay, the warm summer sun seeming to glance from its impenetrable surface, unable to pierce to the depths wherein lurked the wild woodland creatures as the nixies lurked in the lakes; and something that was half a shudder crossed her frame, as the note of that horn called up the thought of all the strange secrets which therein lay hidden. Then, with an effort, she shook off the momentary oppression, and threw her clear glance down into the valley to see whence came the call.

II

HOW ONE CAME

Erna leaned forward over the wide stone window-ledge, and turned her gaze downward to where the road, little more than a bridle-path, emerged from the obscurity of the pine wood to begin its winding ascent to the castle gate. A second blast of the bugle-horn, blown with full lungs and with a good will that seemed to promise a jocund disposition in the visitor who came thus heralded, and there rode out of the wood a knight, followed by his squire and a couple of men-at-arms.

The countess strained her eyes in a natural curiosity to discover what manner of man the forest was sending her as a guest. He was too far below for her to be able to distinguish his features, although he rode with beaver up; but she could appreciate the fact that he sat his horse, a superb chestnut stallion, with the ease and grace of one thoroughly bred to knightly customs. He was a man of commanding stature, overtopping the squire who rode close behind him, and dwarfing the men-at-arms by contrast. His armor, she was able to perceive as he rode up the hill and thus came somewhat nearer, was of the richest, and the flash of jewels on his bridle-rein caught her eye as he rode into the sunlight.

So striking was the mien of the stranger knight that Erna suddenly found herself affected with a strange kindness for him, and unconsciously sighed as the thought flitted through her mind that whoever he might be, he was probably merely a traveller who sought rest and refreshment in the castle to-day, to vanish to-morrow into the unknown world from which he had come. Then she smiled at her own folly in thus grieving at the departure of a perfect stranger before she had even met him to welcome his arrival; and as he drew near the castle gate, and the squire for the third time blew a merry blast on the horn, she drew back from the window. As she did so, she fancied that the unknown cast a sudden glance up to her casement; and far away as he was, she seemed to catch a glimpse of eyes dark and full of fire.

Full of curiosity, Erna waited to be summoned as chatelaine of the castle, to go through the formality of according the hospitalities of the house to the guest. It was the generous custom of the Von Rittenbergs to receive all who came, although the Lady Adelaide was continually predicting evil results from a hospitality so unguarded and so unusual in a fortress where the head of the family was an unmarried woman. The countess took pride in keeping up the family traditions, but she was even more moved to this course by a genuine religious charity. It seemed to her tender heart monstrous to deny food and shelter to any when it was possible to give them; and if her course had been shaped rather by the sentiments of her confessor, Father Christopher, than by ordinary considerations of prudence, there had at least no harm befallen from her custom thus far.

When Erna descended to the great hall to meet the new-comer, she found him conversing with Father Christopher, whom he overtopped by nearly a head. She was astonished by the stranger's wonderful beauty. His face was of a mould as powerful as his figure. A heavy chestnut beard, curling and glossy, but barely descending to his collar, covered the lower part of his countenance. His head was firmly poised, and carried with the air of one accustomed to absolute mastery. His brow, displayed by the removal of his helmet, was wide and high.

But what most impressed Erna in the appearance of the stranger knight were his magnificent eyes, which were like no others she had ever seen. They were brown and liquid, with that glance at once appealing and defiant, pathetic and fierce, which one sees in the eyes of a stag that proudly leads the herd. One perceived that they could upon occasion kindle into splendid rage, although they were capable of looks of such wistful tenderness, such longing, such melting desire. As Erna advanced down the rush-strewn hall to meet the guest, it almost seemed to her that his glance drew her on, so

strongly was she impressed; and yet when he spoke, his voice to her was more strangely sweet than even his wonderful eyes.

Father Christopher announced the new-comer as Baron Albrecht von Waldstein; and he added, with a touch of the gossip, that the knight's home lay in the Neiderwasser valley, to the northward.

The baron himself explained his presence at the castle.

"One of my retainers," he said, "was this morning, as we were riding toward the south, smitten with a strange illness. I feared that we should leave his bones to bleach in the forest for lack of a leech; and he himself had either small courage or strength to ride on. Fortunately his fellow knew that we were near Rittenberg, and I have ventured to bring him here, in the hope that we might for a little find shelter and the aid of a leech."

"He shall be looked to," Erna answered with a gentle gravity which became her well. "Our leech is not unskilful, and his best is at thy service."

"I thank thee," the baron responded, bowing profoundly. "It were a matter of much inconvenience to be left with but one man-at-arms thus far from home."

"Thou must, too, be concerned at the suffering of the poor man," the countess returned. "I am always unhappy if one of my people is ill. They seem so much like animals in their pain, and as if they could not understand what had happened to them. It is very pitiful."

The baron regarded her with a look of inquiry on his handsome face.

"Of course one cares for his servants," he assented, "since he can so ill get on without them."

Had her cousin, Count Stephen, the beat of whose horse's hoofs had so lately died upon the air, said these words, Erna would doubtless have regarded them as shockingly heartless; but now so strongly had the appearance of this stranger won upon her, that she only smiled and shook her head.

"Of a truth they have not our feelings," she said; "but after all, they are yet human beings. Wert thou in the forest through the night?" she added. "Thou canst not have come far this morning, especially riding with one who was ill."

"We were in the forest all night," the baron responded. "We made shift to shelter us in a cave that we chanced upon. It was the sickness of the man which prevented that we rode further yester-e'en, till we had found lodgings."

"But hadst thou no fear of the wood-sprites?" Erna asked.

"Nay," replied Baron Albrecht, "they troubled us not; though we were aware of them as they passed us by," he added, smiling.

"Thou art a bold knight," she murmured beneath her breath.

"Truly thou art favored of heaven," Father Christopher said, "if the wood-sprites can do thee no harm."

The countess looked at the stranger with admiration and astonishment. Bold as were the knights who had made the name of her family respected far and near, they had not been free from the fear of the wild folk of the wood, and it was with a thrill that she looked at the stranger knight as he avowed his fearlessness.

"At least now," she said, "we will do what is in our power for thee, whether it be to protect thee against the dangers of the forest or to offer thee rest and refreshment."

She gave the necessary orders, and passed down the hall again the way she had come. As she ascended the winding stair which led up toward her chamber, she turned and looked backward. The Baron von Waldstein stood where she had left him, and his eyes were fixed upon her retreating figure with a gaze which made her thrill with mingled confusion and pleasure. She turned away her face with a blush which she could not repress, and hastened on.

In her chamber Erna found her great-aunt, all alive with eager curiosity.

"Who is he?" Lady Adelaide demanded. "Elsa says he is the handsomest man alive, and that his jewels are wonderful. Is it so? Didst thou notice them?"

"He is certainly handsome," Erna answered. "As for his jewels, I do not think I noticed them; but now that thou speakest of it, I do remember that there was a splendid red fiery gem on the front of his corselet. It shone so that it caught my eye from the top of the stair as I went down."

"It must be a carbuncle," the old lady responded. "He must be a knight of much consequence; and yet I cannot remember that I ever heard of the Von Waldsteins in my life. I wonder if I have ever seen any of the family. How does he look?"

"He looks," replied her niece absently, "like a woodland god."

Her eyes, as she spoke, fell on the scroll she had been reading earlier in the morning. The place had been the passage in which Saint Cuthbert warns against the snares of appearances. She sighed and turned away from the eager questioning of her companion to take again the pious scroll; but when the Lady Adelaide, grumbling that her curiosity could not be gratified, had left the chamber, the parchment slipped unheeded to the floor, and the countess looked out over the undulating waves of the pine forest with eyes that saw not, so deeply was she absorbed in reverie. The sage words of Saint Cuthbert were forgotten, and she dreamed of the splendid knight of whom she knew nothing but what was to be learned from those appearances against the deceitfulness of which the page she had been reading admonished in vain.

III

HOW THE KNIGHT SANG

The Lady Adelaide found small satisfaction for her curiosity so far as her niece was concerned, but she set her damsel Elsa to collect whatever information might be obtained from the knight's little retinue. Elsa, she knew from experience, might be trusted to gather whatever gossip was afloat about the castle, and to repeat it in a lively and entertaining fashion. But on the present occasion even the skilful Elsa failed to elicit much from the taciturn men-at-arms of Baron von Waldstein, and she could in the end report to her mistress little beyond the fact that the baron was travelling southward, though whether to join the court or army of the Great Emperor or for some private expedition did not appear.

Of his wealth there could be no question when the very bridles of his horses were set with jewels over which the eyes of the Rittenberg servants grew large and round with astonishment and admiration; while from the respect of his men it was evident that he was accustomed to being served as are only those who are born with the right to command. The sick retainer had under the care of the leech recovered somewhat from the severity of his first attack, and his disorder had been pronounced nothing contagious, – a point upon which the Lady Adelaide had been much exercised, – with the opinion of the leech that it would be necessary for him to rest a couple of days before continuing his journey.

Lady Adelaide was forced to be content with this scant information until the assembling of the family at dinner gave her an opportunity of observing the stranger for herself. She came into the hall with her niece prepared to subject the guest to a searching examination, such as she knew herself to be abundantly able to conduct; but for almost the only time in her life the ancient dame found herself from the first moment so completely under the spell of the stranger that she gave herself up unquestioningly to the charm of his presence and his conversation, without even an attempt to force him to give an account of himself.

Nor was she alone in this infatuation. Both Father Christopher and the Countess Erna were as strongly impressed with the singular fascination of the baron. There was about him a contagious joyousness, an exhilarating fulness of life, as if he had drunk from some fountain of youth, and shed about him the influence of his superabundant vitality. Doubtless the unusual vigor and manly beauty of the knight contributed much to this result; but back of these seemed to lie some rare and powerful quality in the nature of the man himself which was more effective than either. It would have been impossible to analyze his charm, but it was also impossible to resist it.

The talk at the table was so animated and full of frank gayety that they lingered by common though unspoken consent far beyond the usual time. The baron had throughout addressed himself to the whole company, seldom speaking directly to Erna, although he now and then appealed to the Lady Adelaide or to Father Christopher; and yet the countess was subtly conscious that in all he said there was a secret intention of interesting herself. She blushed as this thought came to her after she had retired to her chamber and sat over her embroidery, while the priest and the knight were left to entertain each other. So unsophisticated was she that this thought seemed almost unmaidenly, and she contradicted it as soon as it showed itself in her mind.

She was a maid with soul as white as the unspotted ermine. She had been bred under the eye of Father Christopher, – a priest who was also a man, and one of rare insight. She was as ignorant of evil as one must be who had lived ever in seclusion, and her temperament naturally inclined toward piety. Something of an education she had received from the priest. She could read; and there were in the castle several pious books, most of them, it is to be feared, looted by the late Count von Rittenberg on the day of some victory of the Great Emperor in the south at which he had assisted. Over these parchments, mostly religious works, although a wicked volume of the heathen poet Ovid

had somehow chanced among them, Erna passed much time. The brilliant scroll of Ovid, with its profane pictures, at which she had never looked more than in a single glance that showed her what they were like, she had hidden away after a consultation with Father Christopher whether it should not be destroyed despite its value.

The colored threads of her embroidery that afternoon were scarcely more bright than the thoughts which floated through Erna's brain as she sat among her maidens, directing their work; and yet in her mind was no thought which was consciously different from those of the day before or of all the days that had preceded; only that now suddenly all those days appeared, as she looked back, somehow colorless and dull. She did not say to herself that the coming of the stranger knight had suddenly put new meaning into life, but her secret heart knew it, albeit she had yet to understand what her heart felt.

When that night she came into the great hall for supper, a lily-white maid in soul as well as robe, the eyes of the baron glowed as he looked at her. There was in his glance an adoration such as a noble dog might give to his mistress, a tender appeal as of one who beseeches a higher being to take pity upon him; and Father Christopher, who observed closely whatever concerned the countess, sighed as he looked, and secretly shook his head.

The talk at supper touched upon hunting, and the eyes of the baron sparkled as he said:

"Ah! when the wild boar turns on thee, and there is only thy spear-head between thee and his tusks, that is pleasure! That sends the blood through one's veins, and makes the heart tingle!"

Erna shuddered.

"I cannot understand how it can be pleasure," she said, "to put one's life in danger, or to take the life of a beast that has never injured thee."

Baron Albrecht regarded her in some surprise.

"I have never thought of that," he returned frankly. "Why should one consider the beasts? They are made for our sport, are they not?"

"I know you men think so," she responded with a smile; "but I cannot bear that they should suffer for my amusement."

The guest still looked puzzled, and apparently was on the point of questioning further, when Lady Adelaide, evidently fearing lest the words of her niece might offend the baron or give him the idea that Erna was full of strange fancies, said quickly:

"And yet thou canst sing very prettily of the hunting. Let us get nearer the fire, and thou shalt sing for us now. Beshrew me, but this storm is enough to freeze one's bones."

The night had indeed darkened into a storm such as it was unusual to experience at that time of year. Outside the castle turrets they could hear the wind and rain beating, and all the wild uproar of the tempest, as it howled and raged along over the wood. They drew close about the broad hearth, where a cheerful fire had been lighted, despite the fact that the month was June; and in accordance with her aunt's wish, Erna took her lute and sang a gay little ditty in praise of hunting.

"I do not mean it," she protested as she ended, and smiled in pleasant fashion, as if it were his opinion which she was anxious should be set right.

"Perhaps," Father Christopher said, "thou also canst sing, Sir Baron? If so, it will delight us to hear thee."

The request was warmly seconded by Lady Adelaide. Erna said nothing.

"Is it thy wish that I should sing?" the stranger knight asked, turning toward her.

She flushed a little as she answered in the affirmative, and then said to herself that her confusion arose from the fact that there was so seldom any need to consult her wish in such a matter that the attention seemed unusual.

The knight took the lute, which in his large and strong hands looked absurdly out of place, yet which he handled with a great deal of dexterity, and after a brief prelude began in a voice of wonderful richness to sing

THE KOBOLD'S SONG

The kobold's life is full of glee.
For him the forest is made;
For him the leaf swells on the tree,
The fount wells in the glade.
Well he knows every nook,
Every pool where the brook
Breeds him trout in the sun or the shade;
Where the wild berries grow,
Where the cool waters flow;
Where dappled deer hide them
With sleek fawns beside them;
And where the wood-dove's eggs are laid.

He knows the hidden mountain mine
Where wondrous jewels lie;
The caves in which their glorious shine
Dazzles his feasting eye;
He heaps up the red gold
Till his treasures untold
Would the souls of a multitude buy!
All the wealth of the earth
Is his dower from birth.
Who can strength with him measure?
Who baffle his pleasure?
What kings with his riches can vie?

When winds rush whistling through the wood,
The kobold's merry heart bounds;
For well he knows the bugle good
That calls up horse and hounds.
The Wild Huntsman rides past
On the wings of the blast,
And the forest with tumult resounds;
The blithe wood-elves are there,
With the sprites of the air;
And as faster and faster
They follow their master,
He joins in their turbulent rounds!

The baron would have sung further in his wild praises of the life of the race of forest sprites with whom his verse dealt, but he was interrupted by the Lady Adelaide, who crossed herself fervently, exclaiming:

"Now beshrew me, Sir Baron, but it is ill to speak of the Wild Huntsman on a night like this when he may be abroad. Heaven send he be not near enough to the castle to have heard your song!"

The singer stared at her an instant in silent amazement, and then broke into a peal of golden-throated laughter, which was hardly as respectful as was the due of a person of the age and quality of the old dame.

"By my sword," he cried, "it is, then, really true that thou art afraid of the Wild Huntsman! I give thee my word that he is far too much engaged in his pleasure to bother his head about what may be said of him."

It was the turn of the company to stare at the speaker, who seemed to realize that his words might seem strange to them, for instantly he hastened to apologize, and laying aside the lute endeavored to give a new turn to the conversation by a reference to the talk which had taken place at table. But the priest, with a gentle smile, brought him back to the song.

"It is a heathenish ditty, Sir Baron," he said, "with which thou hast favored us, if thou wilt allow me to say so. The treasures of the little men of the hills are doubtless mighty, if half that is said of them be true; but when they boast that their gold can buy the souls of men, they claim too much."

The guest regarded the speaker with a new look of interest and respect; but as he made no reply, Father Christopher continued:

"It is said that often the little men, and the Devil who is in league with them, have tried to entice men to barter their souls for gold; but even if they succeed, it is the Evil One to whom the soul goes, and the kobolds are no richer."

"That is indeed true," the knight responded gravely. "The soul is a curious thing, and the kobolds can have little idea of what it is like. Indeed," he continued, after a moment's pause in which the others regarded him in wonder, "dost thou not suppose, Father, that a kobold might think he were better off for escaping a responsibility so heavy as that of a soul?"

The priest looked at him in gentle reproof, while the Lady Adelaide again crossed herself with the air of being not a little scandalized.

"Perhaps a kobold, who has no soul, might have such a thought," Father Christopher said; "but it is strange that it should come into Christian heads like ours, my son. It grieves me that thou shouldst harbor such fancies."

"Nay," interposed Erna, softly, "I am sure our guest meant no harm. To beings so unhappy as not to know the glory of having a soul, very likely it has been kindly permitted not to realize how melancholy their case is. They are like the animals."

The eyes of the knight were fixed on her face with an intense gaze of wistful longing, and had her earnestness been less she must have blushed under their fire. As it was, she remembered, after she had lain down upon her bed, the look which the baron bent upon her as she thus spoke in his behalf. She rose with the words, and after bidding the guest goodnight, withdrew with Lady Adelaide, leaving the priest to sit over the dying fire with the baron as long as suited their mutual pleasure.

IV HOW HE REMAINED TO WOO

The stay of the Baron von Waldstein at the castle prolonged itself from day to day. At first there was the continued illness of the man-at-arms, which did not yield to the remedies of the leech as quickly as was to be expected; then there was one pretext after another; and in the end there was no pretext at all, save that the guest was loath to depart and the folk at Rittenberg wished him to remain.

He was like a great, sunny, jovial comrade in the castle; and his presence seemed to change the whole atmosphere of the household. Before his coming the Lady Adelaide had seemed to be the dominant spirit because she most asserted herself. The gentle, quiet chatelaine, absorbed in the half-mystical contemplation which had been encouraged by the life she led and nourished upon the pious writings that formed her little library, had allowed the reins of government to rest undisturbed in the hands of her aunt; seldom interfering unless the matter were really serious. She was known among the few peasants that were scattered through the neighborhood as the "White Lady," and the charcoal-burners of the forest would almost have said their prayers to her with as much confidence and reverence as to the Holy Virgin herself, so pure and saintly did she seem to them.

As to Father Christopher, he was of a nature too kindly and easy-going to interfere with the domination of anybody. The good priest was full of simple faith, of genial, sane belief in God and man; he had confidence in the higher nature which he believed to lurk in every human creature, no matter how hidden it might have become by the overlaying of worldliness or of sin; while in all desperate cases he fell back upon an implicit trust in the efficacy of the Church, – an unshaken rock in the midst of the tempests which he had seen rend the whole world in the troublous times in which he lived.

The countess would have found it impossible to define the pleasure she experienced in the society of Baron Albrecht, had she attempted to express it, but she went no further than to say to herself and to her aunt that he was by far the most pleasing man she had ever seen. The careful student of events, had such an one been present, might have found food for thought in the mutual influence which the hostess and her guest exercised on each other. No one could see them together and fail to appreciate the fact that Erna affected the baron profoundly. He had often, it was true, the appearance of failing fully to understand much that she said and did, but he evidently regarded her with a feeling akin to reverence, and it was even possible to perceive that through his interest in what she did and was he grew more thoughtful and earnest.

The effect of the stranger upon Erna was even more marked, perhaps because it showed itself in outward acts rather than by the signs of inward changes. She took up various habits and sports which were calculated directly to please Von Waldstein; riding with him through the forest, and even standing to watch him setting out for the hunt, a pastime which she had hitherto held as cruel, although from old the Von Rittenbergs had been famous hunters. The alteration in her was subtle, but it was real. Father Christopher viewed it with mingled surprise and doubt. Lady Adelaide, on the other hand, was naturally delighted with a change which brought her niece more near to her own worldly views; and while she was too clever to praise openly the course of Erna, she found ways of lending her aid to the helping forward of the work which the mere presence of Baron Albrecht seemed to be effecting.

One lovely summer day, when all the forest was filled with sweet breath of balsamic odors, the perfume of flowers, and the gentle coolness of the breeze which brought both to the riders as they passed along the paths of the wood, Countess Erna and Baron Albrecht rode through its ways, now full of golden sunshine and now dim with delicious shadow, to a mountain tarn, set in the wooded hills like a gleaming gem. Blue as a sapphire under the clear sky stretched the lake, all the surrounding hills reflected in its surface, while along its shores the wild flowers bloomed in rich profusion; the

clustering primrose, the dazzling white thistle, now fading beneath the fervid suns of summer, and the blue forget-me-nots, dear to lovers.

The ride had been a long one; and when the lake was reached the countess dismounted from her palfrey to rest. She seated herself upon a bank of greensward where she could overlook the smooth blue lake, and Baron Albrecht threw himself upon the ground at her feet, looking rather at her than at the water. Behind them the wind murmured in the pine-tops, chanting the song which is never done, but which rises ever from the heart of the Schwarzwald as the wail of the ocean rises continually from its beating waves: the yearning of the wild races of beings who live and die in its mysterious recesses; the cries of the beasts who perish without understanding the strange secrets hidden in the shadows of the wood, secrets which men feel with awe, but which even they cannot fathom.

Erna was conscious of the spell of the forest, and the tones of the song in the pine-tops rang in her ears with powerful appealing; but she was secure in the protecting presence of her companion, and she was more deeply still conscious of the earnestness of his gaze. So closely did Albrecht regard her that without comprehending her own feelings, she began to be embarrassed; and at last to cover her confusion she said:

"Didst thou know that where we see a lake there was once a noble convent, surrounded by beautiful gardens and even with fair pleasure-grounds?"

The knight looked from his companion to the blue tarn below them.

"But where?" he asked.

"Where the lake is. It was the richest and the most influential convent in all the Ober-Schwarzwald. All the nuns were of noble birth, and all had brought with them rich dowries to the convent. But they were wicked nuns; for Father Christopher says that even nuns and monks may be wicked. They feasted and sported and flew falcons, and there was only one in all the convent, a poor little novice whose betrothed had been killed, and whose heart was broken, that was not given over to sin."

"Is it a sin, then, to be happy?" asked Albrecht, smiling up at her from his station at her feet.

"Oh, no; not for us. But they were nuns, vowed to Heaven."

"I never could understand," he began with a puzzled face; then he broke off suddenly. "No matter!" he said. "Go on with thy story. What became of the convent?"

"The Lady Abbess," Erna continued, "was worst of all there; and on her birth-night she made a great feast for all the nuns. They sat and drank wine, and out of doors there was a bitter, bitter storm. And just at midnight there came a knocking at the gate. The Lady Abbess, flushed with wine, told the little novice, who would neither eat nor drink herself, to go and see who was there. So the little novice went, and found an old, old man, all drenched with the rain, and weak with hunger and cold. So she went to the Lady Abbess, and begged that she might be allowed to let the old man in, lest he perish with cold and hunger before morning."

"Why should she care?" the knight asked, as Erna paused and looked over the dark-blue lake as if she could see the scene she described.

"Oh, I told thee that she was not wicked like the rest."

"But would it be wicked not to care for a worthless, broken-down old man that one never saw before?"

The countess smiled upon him.

"When thou askest me questions like that," she responded, "I know that thou art laughing at me or trying to tease me."

A strange look flitted across the face of the baron, but he only replied by a smile.

"But the Lady Abbess," went on Erna, determined to finish the tale she had begun, "would not allow the gates to be opened. 'Thou mayest throw him down thy bread, if thou chooseth,' she told the little novice; 'but thou wilt get no more in its place.' So the little novice wrapped the bread up in the only blanket she had for her bed, and threw it down to the old pilgrim, and then she had to shut

the window and leave him there in the cold. That very hour the water began to roll into the valley, though where it came from no one could tell; and it rose, and rose, and rose. And the wicked nuns ran to the top of their towers, but it was of no use, for the water rose over those until they were all drowned, and there was this lake."

"And didn't even the little novice escape?"

"Oh, yes; there came a boat, shining all like gold, and took the little novice off of the top of the tower; but when the others tried to get into it, it glided away and left them."

She crossed herself as she finished. Albrecht raised his eyes from the blue lake to the blue sky above them, and sighed, a sign of sadness Erna had never seen in him before.

"Why dost thou sigh?" she asked him.

"Because thou hast taught me to," he answered, with the wistful look of a loving animal in his eyes.

Then he laughed gleefully.

"Should not one sigh for the poor drowned nuns?" he asked.

"Yes," Erna said gravely; "they lost their souls."

"Always their souls," her companion responded impulsively. "Why is it that it is always the soul of which one speaks?"

"Because," she answered, with the same air she would have worn had his question been a reasonable one, "the soul is all; it is this which makes us different from the animals."

"And the nixies," he added; "and the undines, and the kobolds."

"Yes," she said gravely. She was silent a moment, and then added: "I do not know if it is right, but Father Christopher thinks it is no harm; I have always pitied the nixies and the kobolds. They are not so bad; and it is not their fault that they have no souls, and that they cannot be saved."

"No," he assented soberly, "it is certainly not their fault. Hast thou never heard it said," he went on, "that if one of them marries a mortal, he would win a soul?"

"Yes," she replied; "but Father Christopher does not believe that that is true."

"But if it were," he began, "wouldst thou –"

He broke off suddenly, and sprang up.

"Come," he cried, with his infectious laugh, "thou art making me as solemn as an owl. Did I talk in this sombre fashion when I came to Rittenberg?"

She did not answer save by a smile. She was aware that the knight had changed since he had been at the castle, although she did not realize what the alteration might mean. She had herself changed too much in the same time to be able to appreciate the subtle difference between what he now was and what he had been on his arrival; and she was too well content with whatever he was to study deeply over the question of the effect of her influence upon him. She rose from the grassy mound on which she had been sitting, and soon they were on their homeward way through the forest.

The day was wasting as they neared the castle, and already in the shadows of the forest the tree-trunks were black and dim. The way wound through the solemn pine-wood, rising and falling as it crossed the hills. Far above them they could see the peaks reddened by the rays of the late sun, while they rode forward in the dimness of the bridle-path below. Now and then some sudden turn in the way brought them to the crest of an elevation from which they could look far over the wide range of the tree-clad country. Spread before them were the sweeping black forests of pine, broken here and there with patches of ling and heather, as the surface of the ocean may be mottled by lighter spaces that mark where the concealed currents run.

Suddenly, as they turned a corner where the path ran along a rocky hillside, becoming so narrow that they were close together, Erna laid her hand on the arm of her companion.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing with the other hand.

Far, far before them, bathed in the golden light of the dying sun, lay the peaks of the Alps. White and pure as crystal the snowy summits rose toward the sky, while lower the slopes were flushed

to rosy pink, or dyed to strange and lovely hues of gold and crimson and purple. From a cloud of rainbow colors soared the rosy peaks, fairer than dreams.

Erna checked her horse, and her companion did the same, although he seemed not fully to comprehend her enthusiasm.

"It is like heaven," she sighed. "Only once before in my whole life have I seen the Alps like that; they are not often to be seen from here."

Albrecht did not answer, but gazed upon the distant mountains, as if he were trying to understand why their appearance should affect his companion so strongly. As they gazed, the hues on the sides of the hills deepened; the rose and gold of the peaks faded; the white of the summits seemed to become transparent, as if one could see through them into the sky beyond; and little by little the sharp outline blended with the quickly dimming heaven against which they had stood out in relief. The shadow of the lower world crept upward; and as they stood there the glorious vision vanished. Only an empty sky where the dimness of night was growing lay in the distance before them in place of the beauty they had seen.

"It was like heaven," Erna said again, as she started her palfrey.

"Then," responded her companion, in a tone of deep gravity, "one must have a soul to appreciate it."

She turned and looked at him questioningly; but with one of those quick changes of mood which always seemed to her so surprising in so manly a knight, he burst into a merry laugh, and began in his rich voice to sing a gay hunting-song.

V

HOW THEY DISCOURSED OF KISSES

The damsel Elsa was a trim and comely maid, with a bright eye and a ready tongue, of which the men and youths of the castle had learned to have a wholesome fear. She went about her affairs singing pleasant ditties, and one morning she crossed the great hall where Baron Albrecht was waiting for the countess, with whom he was to ride out, as had become much their fashion now; and as she went, she sang in her sweet, clear voice a little love-song that ran in this wise:

"When winter howls across the wold,
And all the gates are fast,
Then is thine heart, shut from the cold,
Safe from the blast,
And safe from whomsoe'er goes past.

"When Spring makes lovely all the land,
And casements open wide,
Beware lest some gay wandering band
Should slip inside,
And steal thine heart, and thee deride!

"When once 'tis gone, to win it back
Full vainly mayst thou try;
Nor golden bribes nor tears, alack!
Lost hearts can buy,
Since who loves once, loves till he die."

Baron Albrecht listened to her singing with a smile on his face.

"Now, by my beard," he said, "a song like that is worth a reward."

And he put his great shapely hand beneath her white chin, and kissed her full upon her red lips. At that very moment the Countess Erna came into the hall. Her cheek flushed as the damsel uttered an exclamation and fled hastily, and she looked at the baron in the evident expectation of seeing him also covered with confusion. But Albrecht merely smiled, and smoothed his chestnut beard.

"The damsel sings passing sweetly," he said, unmoved by her glance.

"Is it for that that thou hast kissed her?" demanded Erna, scornfully.

"Truly," replied he.

Erna regarded him with a look in which amazement struggled with disapprobation. She could not comprehend his strange indifference at being discovered.

"And hast thou no shame," she demanded, "to be seen trifling with the girl?"

"Shame?" he echoed. "Why should I have?"

"Nor any fear of my displeasure?"

"Thy displeasure?" he repeated. "Why shouldst thou be displeased?"

She regarded him in silence a moment; and as she did not speak, he continued:

"Surely thou canst not be jealous of a serving-wench?"

She drew herself up proudly, all the blood of her ancestors aflame in her clear pale cheek.

"The Von Rittenbergs are jealous neither of serving-wenches nor on account of strangers," she returned haughtily.

Albrecht looked at her in a perplexity that it was impossible not to believe genuine.

"Then what is my offence?" he asked. "I did but kiss the maid. I meant her no harm. Why should not one kiss a smooth cheek if it likes him?"

He spoke humbly, yet with no air either of bravado or of conscious guilt. She felt that his ignorance was not feigned, yet could hardly bring herself to believe that he did not understand what her feeling must be at discovering him in the act she had seen. Moreover, she found herself strangely at a loss how to reply to his question, if it were in reality serious. If he did not perceive the impropriety of his conduct, it was not easy for her to explain it to him. She stood a moment in silence, regarding him with a penetrating glance under which he showed no sign of wavering, and then instead of turning away to leave him as had at first been her intention, she smiled faintly, and with an expression of doubt still in her eyes.

"One would think, Sir Knight," she said, "that thy father's house must needs be a rude place if it is there held proper to kiss the damsels that please one, without hindrance."

"In thy father's castle," he answered slowly, "we have perhaps lived in a fashion that would seem to thee rude, for that my mother died at my birth, and there has been no one but men to make the rules of the house; but why it is wrong to kiss a comely woman if she please thee, is one of the things that I have never been told there or here."

Erna's tender heart was at once touched by the thought of her companion's orphanage, her own motherless childhood being still too fresh in her mind not to render her susceptible to this plea. She took up her whip from the bench, and turned quickly, that he might not see the tears that sprang to her eyes whenever one mentioned the loss of a mother.

"Well," she said, "I will leave it to Father Christopher to deal with thy transgression."

The change in her tone did not escape his quick ears, and he hastened to follow her to the courtyard, where the horses were waiting.

Their way that morning led them over hill and dale, until they came at length to a wide meadow, where the knight was minded to fly his falcon. A stream ran through the midst of the valley, and along its banks the grass was as vividly green as the emeralds which sparkled in the hilt of Albrecht's dagger; while all through it the golden buttercups were set as thickly as the stars in the sky of a summer's night. Here and there grew clusters of tall reeds and water grasses gently swaying in the soft breeze; and as Albrecht took his falcon from the wrist of his squire, who carried the bird, a splendid white heron rose with smooth, steady flight from amid the rushes, and went soaring upward. The baron quickly and deftly pulled the hood from the falcon's head; but just as he was loosening the jess Erna leaned forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"Let the heron go unharmed," she said. "Why shouldst thou strike him down?"

"Because," he responded, "thou art to wear his plumes in thy cap after I am gone, in memory of me."

"After thou art gone?" she repeated softly, drawing back.

He smiled and shook off the hawk, which rose in graceful circles until it was far overhead, and hung dizzily above the meadow. It sailed to and fro a moment until its prey, which had discovered it and in dismay was straining every nerve to quicken its flight, was just beneath it; then suddenly, with the rapidity of a thunderbolt, it fell straight upon the beautiful heron. Erna uttered a cry of dismay, and covered her eyes with her hand.

"It is too cruel!" she exclaimed.

Albrecht struck his hands together in glee.

"It is a brave bird!" he cried. "I would rather lose a gold mine than that falcon. He is as sure of his quarry as the rain is to fall to the ground."

Erna did not answer, but she regarded him with the look of one who strove to understand his pleasure, and to understand is almost to share. She said nothing while the squire rode off to bring in the game; and when the noble heron, its glistening throat stained with blood, was brought to them,

she not only strove to restrain the involuntary shudder which seized her, but she did not remonstrate when her companion continued the praises of his bird.

"Did one ever see a more rich plumage?" Albrecht demanded. "It will set off thy cap bravely; and I have always been told that womenkind are fond of gay attire."

"It is indeed a beautiful bird," Erna responded; "but dost thou know that there is always something very amusing in the way thou speakest, as if thou hadst never seen human beings till now."

A faint flush crossed Albrecht's cheek. He looked at the dead heron.

"I never thought of it before," he said; "but it does seem hard that he should have to be killed just to please me."

Erna flushed in her turn. She thought she had offended him by her criticism of his manner of speech.

"I beg thy pardon," she began; but he interrupted her.

"Thou hast no need," he said. "Besides, thou art right. I know nothing of women. I do not even know, it seems, how they should be treated, or how to please them. Otherwise," he added with his warm smile, "I should not have offended thee this morning by kissing the damsel who sang so sweetly."

The countess smiled, and turned toward him with her face full of light. They had not dismounted, but had halted their horses near the margin of the brook on the banks of which the heron had been feeding lower down.

"That," she said, "is not a thing to be taught. It is learned from the air and from the birds."

"Then why has it not been revealed to me? I have been much in the forest."

"To kill the birds! In good sooth, I know not that one may learn of the air and the woods who goes as thou goest, with falcon and boar-spear. But at least," she added, regarding him with a smile, "thou must know that when one loves –"

She broke off suddenly, and turned away her face, with a flush creeping up into her cheek.

"Well," Albrecht demanded eagerly, "what then?"

"I was but thinking," she returned, in a voice lower than before, "that certainly every man knoweth that when one truly loveth another, he will care for the caress of none save only the loved one."

"I had never thought of that," the knight responded gravely.

"Then of a surety thou hast never known what it is to love."

"By that token, never," he answered, smiling; "albeit it were possible that the test would not hold; and in any case it were not difficult, perchance, for thee to teach me."

The Countess Erna looked into his face all flushed and radiant, and there was that in her eyes which no man could see and fail to understand; and although the squire waiting hard by might not note that aught had been said or done out of the ordinary course, none the less had their hearts spoken each to each from that moment. Erna wheeled her horse, and began to move toward the entrance of the valley; and as Albrecht rode beside her, he suddenly leaned forward and caught her palfrey's rein, so that the beast was almost thrown upon his haunches with the abruptness of his arrest.

"Do not ride toward the upper ford," he said; "the nix is in an evil mood to-day, and mayhap might do thee a mischief in her spitefulness."

Erna looked at him with astonishment and alarm.

"And how knowest thou of the moods of the nix?" she demanded.

His eyes fell, and a flush stained his swarthy cheek. Then he seemed to recover his self-possession.

"It is a knowledge," he replied, "that is learned from the air and from the birds, but only by those who are in sympathy with the woodland creatures so that they may comprehend it."

Erna laughed merrily, and turned her palfrey toward the lower ford.

"In sober sooth, thou knowest no more of the nix than do I," she told him; "but I mind not if I please thy fancy."

But when alone in her chamber she thought of this, she crossed herself and shivered a little with a not unpleasing awe.

VI

HOW THEY CAME TO KISSES THEMSELVES

From that day when they rode together to the slaying of the heron by the stream in the meadow, there was a new bond between the Countess Erna and the Baron Albrecht. There had been nothing further said between them of love, even in the impersonal way in which they had then begun to talk of it, but the revelation of the glance which had then passed from her eyes to his changed all the old relations. They knew that they loved each other, and although they were not yet come to the confession in word of their love, they understood well that they belonged each to the other.

One day the countess sat at her embroidery in the hall, with her guest near her, and Father Christopher not far away. Without, a wild tempest of wind and rain shook the castle towers, and swept over forest and hill. From the casements one looked out upon a sea of mist that rolled above the tree-tops, beaten and torn by the wind, and lashing the hills in angry, mimic waves. All the weird voices of the Schwarzwald, melancholy or fierce, raged and wailed in the troubled air. It was a day when the unholy powers of the forest held high festival, and it was with inward shudders that Erna heard afar their hoarse tones, calling and yelling to one another in the storm.

Sitting at her embroidery frame without her damsels, who were scattered about the castle upon one mission or another, Erna talked with the baron and the priest, now and then thinking with dread of the night which was not far away, and hearing in her fancy already the roaring of the blast about the towers, the shrill cry of the Wild Huntsman, and the shrieks of his elfin train. When she looked up at the splendid form of her guest, however, her fears vanished in a breath, and she smiled that she should have found it possible to fear while he was at her side. In the warmth of his glance the tempest and all the dread dwellers in the forest were forgotten, and she was conscious only of the joy of his presence.

The knight had been asking concerning the armor of Erna's father, which hung in the hall; and from this the talk easily drifted to the Great Emperor, his noble deeds, his splendid army, and the brilliant court which he had gathered about him.

"How much I should like to see it all," the maiden said dreamily, as she looked earnestly at Albrecht; "the tourneys, the feasts, the processions, and all the beautiful court life."

Father Christopher regarded her in some amazement.

"Is it thou," he asked, "who sayest this? Thou who hast always been so thankful that thou wert spared the temptations and the worldliness of the court? Didst thou not refuse to go to Mayence when Charlemagne was there with his train, because thou didst not wish to fill thy mind with frivolous images?"

"So I did, Father, but mayhap my aunt was not wholly in the wrong when she called me a fool for my refusal," Erna answered, smiling.

"The court would ill suit me," Albrecht remarked, while the good priest remained sunk in astonishment at the change which the words of Erna indicated. "My choice is for the forest, for the hunt and the chase. The only thing at court that would attract me would be the tourney."

"Would that I might see thee in the lists!" Erna half murmured, leaning a little toward him.

"Mayhap that thou shalt," he replied. "Stranger things than this have come to pass. If thou dost, thou wilt see me break a lance in thy behalf right gladly."

"And thou no longer thinkest," Father Christopher interposed gravely, "that it is wrong for knights to risk their lives in mere wanton pastime?"

"Oh, there may be some danger," she returned with a slight air of impatience, "but why must one be forever troubling to examine too closely? Is there to be no pleasure in life lest harm should come after it, forsooth?"

Father Christopher left his seat, to stand for a moment looking at the countess as if in bewilderment. He did not in truth know what to make of his mistress in such a mood as this, so different was it from all that she had ever been before. He seemed minded to speak, and then, as if reflecting that her words did not after all contain aught which he was called upon to regard with severity, and perhaps that in any case what he might wish to say to her would be delivered better privately, he sighed deeply, and moved away without further speech. Erna looked after him as he slowly passed down the hall, the edge of his robe here and there catching upon one of the rushes with which the floor was strewn.

"Poor Father Christopher!" she said with a low, sweet laugh, "I have grieved him. It is a pity to make him unhappy. I never used to do that."

She regarded her gay-colored embroidery a moment absently, as if she did not see it; then suddenly she dropped the hand which held her needle and leaned toward her companion.

"What hast thou done to me?" she demanded. "Hast thou bewitched me, that all the things that I loved have become dull to me, and all the things which I wished not for are now in my thoughts with longing?"

A roaring blast shook the castle windows, and it was as if the spirits of the storm, sweeping up from the bosom of the wild and mighty Schwarzwald, shouted in mocking laughter outside; but neither Erna nor Albrecht regarded.

"I have done nothing to thee," the knight answered, in his turn bending forward; "but what hast thou done to me, that I linger here day after day, and that I consider now the pain of the beast that dies by my spear, or of the bird that my falcon strikes?"

"Nothing have I done to thee," Erna answered; but her voice faltered, and her glance fell.

Albrecht reached out his big brown hand, and took her milk-white fingers in his.

"Only," he said, "I love thee."

Erna rose to her feet, and cast a swift glance around the hall, as if she were minded to escape; then she turned toward him, and he sprang to her to clasp her in his arms. The knight kissed her glowingly upon her red lips.

"Now thou art mine," he said, "and all the world shall not wrest thee from me."

He had scarcely spoken when in the darkening afternoon a mighty blast seemed to throw itself against the tower; a yell of elfin laughter resounded in the hollow chimney, and the hound which had lain at Erna's feet crouched flat on the rushes, whining with deadly fear. Frighted, yet too full of her love to heed the cry of wild sprite or the fierceness of the tempest, Erna clung closely to the knight, and thus together did the Lady Adelaide, coming unexpectedly into the hall, surprise them.

"Body of Saint Fridolin!" she cried.

The lovers started, but although they released each other from the embrace in which they had been wound, they still stood together, and the arm of the knight was about Erna's waist. She clung to his hand in maidenly agitation, not wholly unmixed with the fear which the sudden vehemence of the tempest had aroused, yet she smiled bravely upon her aunt, with eyes which shone with the firmness and the joy of the troth she had just plighted.

The Lady Adelaide, whose nerves were already upset by the storm and by the weird sounds which were heard about the castle, was doubly overwhelmed with emotion by the sight before her. It was a shock from which it was not easy for her to recover, to see her niece in the arms of any man. She had so long looked upon Countess Erna as cold and devoid of all warm human passion, that she could scarcely believe the evidence of her own senses now that she beheld the countess with her lips pressed to those of a lover. She had so long cherished, moreover, the hope that by a marriage with Count Stephen Erna might still bear the Von Rittenberg name, that it could not but be with a keen pang of disappointment that she saw all these schemes swept away.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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