

**E.WERNER**

THE ALPINE

FAY

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**The Alpine Fay**

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# E. Werner

## The Alpine Fay: A Romance

### CHAPTER I. A MOUNTAIN-HOME

High above the snow-crowned summits of the mountains gleamed a rainbow. The storm had passed; there was still a low mutter of thunder in the ravines, and masses of clouds lay encamped about the mountainsides, but the skies were once more clear, the loftiest peaks were unveiling, and dark forests and green slopes were beginning slowly to emerge from the sea of cloud and mist.

The extensive Alpine valley through which rushed a considerable stream lay far in the depths of the mountain-range, so secluded and lonely that it might have been entirely shut off from the world and its turmoil; and yet the world had found the way to it. The quiet mountain-road, usually deserted save for an occasional wagon or a strolling pedestrian, was all astir with bustle and life. Everywhere were to be seen groups of engineers and labourers; everywhere measuring, surveying, and planning were going on; the railway, in a couple of years, was to stretch its iron arms forth into this mountain seclusion, and preparations were already making for its course.

Some way up the mountain-road, on the brink of a hollow whose rocky sides fell away in a steep descent, lay a dwelling-house, which at first sight did not appear to differ much from others scattered here and there among the mountains; a near view, however, soon made plain that it was no peasant's abode situated thus on the spacious green slope. The house had firmly-cemented walls of blocks of stone, and low but broad doors and windows; two semicircular projections, the pointed roofs of which gave them the air of small towers, lent it a stately appearance, and above the entrance there was artistically carved in the stone a scutcheon.

It was one of those old baronial mansions, yet to be found here and there among the mountains, simple and rude, half suggesting a peasant abode, gray and weather-worn, but stoutly resisting the decay to which many a proud castle had fallen a victim. The ascending slope of the mountain formed a picturesque background, and high above a huge peak reared its rocky crest, crowned with snow, lonely and proud.

The interior of the house accorded with its outside. Through a vaulted hall, with a stone floor, a low spacious room was reached which occupied nearly the entire width of the building. The wainscot, brown with age, the gigantic tiled stove, the high-backed chairs, and the heavily-carved oaken cupboards were all plain and simple and showed marks of long years of use. The windows were wide open, affording a magnificent view of the mountains, but the two gentlemen sitting at the table were too earnestly engaged in conversation to pay any heed to the beauties which each moment revealed more fully.

One of them, a man fifty years of age, was a giant in stature, with a broad chest and powerful limbs. Not a thread of silver as yet streaked his thick hair and fair, full beard; his tanned face beamed with the life and health that characterized his entire figure. His companion was of perhaps the same age, but his spare figure, his sharp features, and his gray hair made him appear much older. His face and the high forehead, already deeply lined, spoke of restless striving and scheming, as well as of the energy necessary for them; there was in his expression a degree of arrogance which was far from prepossessing, and his air and speech conveyed an impression of self-confidence, as of a man accustomed to rule those about him.

"So pray listen to reason, Thurgau," he said, in a tone in which impatience was audible. "Your opposition will do you no good. In any case you will be forced to relinquish your estate."

"I, forced!" exclaimed Thurgau, angrily. "We'll see about that. While I live, not a stone of Wolkenstein shall be touched."

"But it is directly in the way. The big bridge starts from here, and the line of railway goes directly through your property."

"Then alter your cursed line of railway! Carry it where you choose, over the top of the Wolkenstein, for all I care, but let my house alone. No need to talk, Nordheim; I persist in my 'no.'"

Nordheim smiled, half compassionately, half sarcastically: "You seem to have entirely forgotten in your seclusion how to deal with the world and its requirements. Do you actually imagine that an undertaking like ours can be put a stop to, just because the Freiherr von Thurgau chooses to refuse us a few square rods of his land? If you persist, nothing is left us save to have recourse to our right of compulsion. You know that we have long been empowered to use it."

"Oho, I have rights too!" exclaimed the Freiherr, bringing his fist down heavily upon the table. "I have protested, and shall continue to protest, while I live. Wolkenstein Court shall be left untouched, though the entire railway company with the Herr President Nordheim at their head should band themselves against me."

"But if you are offered double its value—"

"If I were offered a hundred times its value, it would be all the same. I do not bargain for the last of my inheritance. Wolkenstein Court shall not be touched, and there's an end of it!"

"This is your old obstinacy which has so often stood in your way in life," said the president with irritation. "I might have foreseen it; it is far from agreeable to have my own brother-in-law force to extreme measures the company of which I am president."

"That is why you condescended to come up here yourself, for the first time for years," Thurgau said, with a sneer.

"I wanted to try to talk you into a reasonable state of mind, since my letters were of no avail. You surely know how entirely my time is taken up."

"Yes, yes, heaven knows it is! Nothing would induce me to run the perpetual race which you call life. What good do you get out of your millions and your incredible successes? Now here, now there, you are always on the wing, always burdened down with business and responsibility. There's where you get the wrinkles on your forehead and your gray hair. Look at me!" He sat upright and stretched his huge limbs. "I am a full year older than you!"

"Very true; but then it is not given to every man to live up here with the marmots and shoot chamois. You resigned from the army ten years ago, although your ancient name would have insured you a brilliant career."

"Because the service did not suit me. It never did suit the Thurgaus. You think that is what has brought them down in the world? I can see you do by your sneer. Well, there is not, it is true, much of the old splendour left, but I have at least a roof over my head, and the soil beneath my feet is my own; here no one has a right to order me about and control me, least of all your cursed railway. No offence, brother-in-law, we will not quarrel over the matter, and neither has a right to reproach the other, for if I am obstinate you are domineering. You hector your precious company until they are almost blind and deaf, and if one of them dares to contradict you he is simply tossed aside neck and crop."

"What do you know about it?" asked Nordheim, piqued by the last words. "As a rule, you trouble yourself very little about our affairs."

"True, but I was talking awhile ago with a couple of engineers who were up here surveying, and who, of course, had no idea of the relationship between us; they scolded away at a great rate about you and your tyranny, and favouritism. Oh, I heard a deal that was extremely interesting."

The president shrugged his shoulders with an air of indifference: "My appointment of the superintendent for this district was probably distasteful to the gentlemen. They certainly threatened an open revolt because I advanced to be their superior officer a young man of seven-and-twenty who has more in his head than all the rest of them put together."

"But they maintain that he is a fellow who would shun no means, so it might promote his advancement," Thurgau said, bluntly. "You, as president of the company, had nothing to do with the appointment,—the engineer-in-chief alone has the right to appoint his staff."

"Officially it is so, and I do not often bring my influence to bear in his department; when I do so I expect due deference to be paid to my wishes. Enough, Elmhurst is superintendent and will remain so. If it does not suit the gentlemen they can resign their posts; their opinion is of very little consequence."

In his words there was all the arrogant self-assertion of a man accustomed to have his own way, regardless of consequences. Thurgau was about to reply, but at the moment the door opened, or rather was flung wide, and a something made up of drenched clothes and floating curls flew past the president and eagerly embraced the Freiherr; a second something, equally wet and very shaggy, followed, and also rushed towards the master of the house, springing upon him with loud and joyful barks of recognition. The noisy and unexpected intrusion was almost an attack, but Thurgau must have been used to such onslaughts, for he showed no impatience at the damp caresses thus bestowed upon him.

"Here I am, papa!" cried a clear girlish voice, "wet as a nixie; we were up on the Wolkenstein all through the storm; just see how we look, Griff and I!"

"Yes, it is plain that you come directly from the clouds," Thurgau said, laughing. "But do you not see, Erna, that we have a visitor? Do you recognize him?"

Erna turned about; she had not perceived the president, who had risen and stepped aside upon her entrance, and for a few seconds she seemed uncertain as to his identity, but she finally exclaimed, delightedly, "Uncle Nordheim!" and hurried towards him. He, however, put out his hands and stood on the defensive.

"Pray, pray, my child; you are dripping at every step. You are a veritable water-witch. For heaven's sake do not let the dog come near me! Would you expose me to a rain-storm here in the room?"

Erna laughed, and, taking the dog by the collar, drew him away. Griff showed a decided desire to cultivate an acquaintance with the visitor, which in his dripping condition would hardly have been agreeable. In fact, his young mistress did not look much better; the mountain-shoes which shod her little feet very clumsily, her skirt of some dark woollen stuff, kilted high, and her little black beaver hat, were all dripping wet. She seemed to care very little about it, however, as she tossed her hat upon a chair and stroked back her damp curls.

The girl resembled her father very slightly; her blue eyes and fair hair she had inherited from him, but otherwise there existed not the smallest likeness between the Freiherr's giant proportions and good-humoured but rather expressionless features and the girl of sixteen, who, lithe and slender as a gazelle, revealed, in spite of her stormy entrance, an unconscious grace in every movement. Her face was rosy with the freshness of youth; it could not be called beautiful, at least not yet: the features were still too childish and undeveloped, and there was an expression bordering on waywardness about the small mouth. Her eyes, it is true, were beautiful, reminding one in their blue depths of the colour of the mountain-lakes. Her hair, confined neither by ribbon nor by net, and dishevelled by the wind, hung about her shoulders in thick masses of curls. She certainly did not look as if she belonged in a drawing-room, she was rather the personification of a fresh spring rain.

"Are you afraid of a few rain-drops, Uncle Nordheim?" she asked. "What would have become of you in the rain-spout to which we were exposed just now? I did not mind it much, but my companion—"

"Why, I should have thought Griff's shaggy hide accustomed to such drenchings," the Freiherr interposed.

"Griff? Oh, I had left him as usual at the sennerin's hut; he cannot climb, and from there one must rival the chamois. I mean the stranger whom I met on the way. He had strayed from the path,

and could not find his way down in the mist; if I had not met him, he would be on the Wolkenstein at this moment."

"Yes, these city men," said Thurgau,—"they come up here with huge mountain-staffs, and in brand-new travelling-suits, and behave as if our Alpine peaks were mere child's play; but at the first shower they creep into a rift in the rocks and catch cold. I suppose the fine fellow was in a terrible fright when the storm came up?"

Erna shook her head, but a frown appeared on her forehead.

"No, he was not afraid; he stayed beside me with entire composure while the lightning and rain were at their worst, and in our descent he showed himself courageous, although it was evident he was quite unused to that sort of thing. But he is an odious creature. He laughed when I told him of the mountain-sprite who sends the avalanches down into the valley every winter, and when I grew angry he observed, with much condescension, 'True, this is the atmosphere for superstition; I had forgotten that.' I wished the mountain-sprite would roll an avalanche down upon his head on the spot, and I told him so."

"You said that to a stranger whom you had met for the first time?" asked the president, who had hitherto listened in silence, with an air of surprise.

Erna tossed her head: "Of course I did! We could not endure him, could we, Griff? You growled at him when he reached the sennerin's hut with me, and you were right,—good dog! But now I really must change my wet clothes; Uncle Nordheim will else catch cold from merely having me near him."

She hurried off as quickly as she had come; Griff tried to follow her, but the door was shut in his face, and so he decided upon another course. He shook from his shaggy hide a shower of drops in every direction, and lay down at his master's feet.

Nordheim took out his pocket-handkerchief and ostentatiously brushed with it his black coat, although not a drop had reached it.

"Forgive me, brother-in-law; I must say that the way in which you allow your daughter to grow up is inexcusable."

"What?" asked Thurgau, apparently extremely surprised that any one could possibly find anything to object to in his child. "What is the matter with the girl?"

"Everything, I should say, that could be the matter with a Fräulein von Thurgau. What a scene we have just witnessed! And you allow her to wander about the mountains alone for hours, making acquaintance with any tourist she may chance to meet."

"Pshaw! she is but a child!"

"At sixteen? It was a great misfortune for her to lose her mother so early, and since then you have positively let her run wild. Of course when a young girl grows up under such circumstances, without instruction, without education—"

"You are mistaken," the Freiherr interrupted him. "When I removed to Wolkenstein Court, after the death of my wife, I brought with me a tutor, the old magister, who died last spring. Erna had instruction from him, and I have brought her up. She is just what I wished her to be; we have no use up here for such a delicate hot-house plant as your Alice. My girl is healthy in body and mind; she has grown up free as a bird of the air, and she shall stay so. If you call that running wild, so be it, for aught I care! My child suits me."

"Perhaps so, but you will not always be the sole ruling force in her life. If Erna should marry—"

"Mar-ry?" Thurgau repeated in dismay.

"Certainly, you must expect her to have lovers, sooner or later."

"The fellow who dares to present himself as such shall have a lesson from me that he'll remember!" roared the Freiherr in a rage.

"You bid fair to be an amiable father-in-law," said Nordheim, dryly. "I should suppose it was a girl's destiny to marry. Do you imagine I shall require my Alice to remain unmarried because she is my only daughter?"

"That is very different," said Thurgau, slowly, "a very different thing. You may love your daughter,—you probably do love her,—but you could give her to some one else with a light heart. I have nothing on God's earth save my child; she is all that is left to me, and I will not give her up at any price. Only let the gentlemen to whom you allude come here as suitors; I will send them home again after a fashion that shall make them forget the way hither."

The president's smile was that of the cold compassion bestowed upon the folly of a child.

"If you continue faithful to your educational theories you will have no cause to fear," he said, rising. "One thing more: Alice arrives at Heilborn to-morrow morning, where I shall await her; the physician has ordered her the baths there, and the mountain-air."

"No human being could ever get well and strong in that elegant and tiresome haunt of fashion," Thurgau declared, contemptuously. "You ought to send the girl up here, where she would have the mountain-air at first hand."

Nordheim's glance wandered about the apartment, and rested with an unmistakable expression upon the sleeping Griff; finally he looked at his brother-in-law: "You are very kind, but we must adhere to the physician's prescriptions. Shall we not see you in the course of a day or two?"

"Of course; Heilborn is hardly two miles away," said the Freiherr, who failed to perceive the cold, forced nature of his brother-in-law's invitation. "I shall certainly come over and bring Erna."

He rose to conduct his guest to his conveyance; the difference of opinion to which he had just given such striking expression was in his eyes no obstacle to their friendly relations as kinsmen, and he bade his brother-in-law farewell with all the frank cordiality native to him. Erna too came fluttering down-stairs like a bird, and all three went out of the house together.

The mountain-wagon which had brought the president to Wolkenstein Court a couple of hours previously—not without some difficulty in the absence of any good road—drove into the court-yard, and at the same moment a young man made his appearance beneath the gate-way and approached the master of the house.

"Good-day, doctor," cried the Freiherr in his jovial tones, whilst Erna, with the ease and freedom of a child, offered the new-comer her hand. Turning to his brother-in-law, Thurgau added: "This is our Æsculapius and physician-in-ordinary. You ought to put your Alice under his care; the man understands his business."

Nordheim, who had observed with evident displeasure his niece's familiar greeting of the young doctor, touched his hat carelessly, and scarcely honoured the stranger, whose bow was somewhat awkward, with a glance. He shook hands with his brother-in-law, kissed Erna on the forehead, and got into the vehicle, which immediately rolled away.

"Now come in, Dr. Reinsfeld," said the Freiherr, who did not apparently regret this departure. "But it occurs to me that you do not know my brother-in-law,—the gentleman who has just driven off."

"President Nordheim,—I am aware," replied Reinsfeld, looking after the vehicle, which was vanishing at a turn in the road.

"Extraordinary," muttered Thurgau. "Everybody knows him, and yet he has not been here for years. It is exactly as if some potentate were driving through the mountains."

He went into the house; the young physician hesitated a moment before following him, and looked round for Erna; but she was standing on the low wall that encircled the court-yard, looking after the conveyance as with some difficulty it drove down the mountain.

Dr. Reinsfeld was about twenty-seven years old; he did not possess the Freiherr's gigantic proportions, but his figure was fine, and powerfully knit. He certainly was not handsome, rather the contrary, but there was an undeniable charm in the honest, trustful gaze of his blue eyes and in his face, which carried written on its brow kindness of heart. The young man's manners and bearing, it is true, betrayed entire unfamiliarity with the forms of society, and there was much to be desired in his attire. His gray mountain-jacket and his old beaver hat had seen many a day of tempest and rain, and his heavy mountain-shoes, their soles well studded with nails, showed abundant traces of the muddy

mountain-paths. They bore testimony to the fact that the doctor did not possess even a mountain-pony for his visits to his patients,—he went on foot wherever duty called him.

"Well, how are you, Herr Baron?" he asked when the two men were seated opposite each other in the room. "All right again? No recurrence of the last attack?"

"All right," said Thurgau, with a laugh. "I cannot understand why you should make so much of a little dizzy turn. Such a constitution as mine does not give gentlemen of your profession much to do."

"We must not make too light of the matter. At your years you must be prudent," said the young physician. "I hope nothing will come of it, if you only follow my advice,—avoid all excitement, and diet yourself to a degree. I wrote it all down for you."

"Yes, you did, but I shall not pay it any attention," the Freiherr said, pleasantly, leaning back in his arm-chair.

"But, Herr von Thurgau—"

"Let me alone, doctor! The life that you prescribe for me would be no life at all. I take care of myself! I, accustomed as I am to follow a chamois to the topmost peak of our mountains without any heed of the sun's heat or the winter's snow,—always the first if there is any peril to be encountered,—I give up hunting, drink water, and avoid all agitation like a nervous old maid! Nonsense! I've no idea of anything of the kind."

"I did not conceal from you the grave nature of your attack, nor that it might have dangerous consequences."

"I don't care! Man cannot balk his destiny, and I never was made for such a pitiable existence as you would have me lead. I prefer a quick, happy death."

Reinsfeld looked thoughtful, and said, in an undertone, "In fact, you are right. Baron, but—" He got no further, for Thurgau burst into a loud laugh.

"Now, that's what I call a conscientious physician! When his patient declares that he cares not a snap for his prescriptions, he says 'you are right!' Yes, I am right; you see it yourself."

The doctor would have protested against this interpretation of his words, but Thurgau only laughed more loudly, and Erna made her appearance with Griff, her inseparable companion.

"Uncle Nordheim is safe across the bridge, although it was half flooded," she said. "The engineers all rushed to his assistance and helped to draw the carriage across, after which they drew up in line on each side and bowed profoundly."

She mimicked comically the reverential demeanour of the officials, but the Freiherr shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Fine fellows those! They abuse my brother-in-law in every way behind his back, but as soon as he comes in sight they bow down to the ground. No wonder the man is arrogant."

"Papa," said Erna, who had been standing beside her father's chair, and who now put her arm around his neck, "I do not think Uncle Nordheim likes me: he was so cold and formal."

"That is his way," said Thurgau, drawing her towards him. "But he has a great deal of fault to find with you, you romp."

"With Fräulein Erna?" asked Reinsfeld, with as much astonishment and indignation in look and tone as if the matter in question had been high treason.

"Yes; she ought to conduct herself like a Fräulein von Thurgau. Oh, yes, child, awhile ago he offered to have you come to him to be trained for society with his Alice by all sorts of governesses! What do you say to such an arrangement?"

"I do not want to go to my uncle, papa. I will never go away from you. I mean to stay at Wolkenstein Court as long as I live."

"I knew it!" said the Freiherr, triumphantly. "And they insist that you will marry some day,—go off with a perfect stranger and leave your father alone in his old age! We know better, eh, Erna? We two belong together and we will stay together."

He stroked his child's curls with a tenderness pathetic in the bluff, stalwart man, and Erna nestled close to him with passionate ardour. It was plain to see that they belonged together; each was devoted to the other, heart and soul.

## CHAPTER II. A MORNING CALL

"Well, Herr Superintendent, you are at your post already? It is one of difficulty and responsibility, especially for a man of your years, but I hope nevertheless that you are quite competent to fulfil its duties."

The young man to whom President Nordheim addressed these words bowed respectfully, but in no wise humbly, as he replied, "I am perfectly aware that I must show myself worthy of the distinction which I owe principally to your influence in my behalf, Herr President."

"Yes, there was much against you," said Nordheim. "First of all, your youth, which was regarded as an obstacle by those in authority, the rather that older and more experienced applicants look upon their rejection as an offence, and finally there was a decided opposition to my interference in your favour. I need not tell you that you must take all these things into account; they will make your position far from an easy one."

"I am prepared for that," Elmhurst replied, quietly, "and I shall not yield a jot to the hostility of my fellow-workers. I have hitherto, Herr President, had no opportunity to express my gratitude to you save by words; I trust I shall be able to show it by deeds at some future time."

His answer seemed to please the president, and, far more graciously than was his wont, he signed to his favourite to sit down,—for such Elmhurst was already considered in circles that were quite conscious of the value of the president's preference.

The young superintendent-engineer, who, upon this official visit, wore, of course, the livery of the company, was extremely attractive in appearance, tall and slender, with regular, decided features, to which a complexion browned by the sun, and a dark beard and moustache, lent a manly air. Thick brown hair was parted above a broad brow which betokened keen intelligence, and the eyes would have been extremely fine had they not been so cold and grave in expression. They might observe keenly, and perhaps flash with pride and energy, but they could hardly light up with enthusiasm, or glow with the warmer impulses of the heart; there was no youthful fire in their dark depths. The man's manner was simple and calm, perfectly respectful to his superior, but without a shadow of servility.

"I am not quite satisfied with what I see here," Nordheim began again. "The men are taking a great deal of time for the preliminary work, and I doubt if we can begin the construction next year; there is no display of eagerness or energy. I begin to fear that we have made a mistake in putting ourselves into the hands of this engineer-in-chief."

"He is considered a first-class authority," Elmhurst interposed.

"True, but he has grown old, physically and mentally, and such a work as this demands the full vigor of manhood,—a famous name is not all that is required. The undertaking depends greatly upon the conductors of the individual sections, and your section is one of the most important on the entire line."

"The most important, I think. We have every possible natural obstacle to overcome here; I am afraid we shall not always succeed, even with the most exact calculations."

"My opinion precisely; the post requires a man capable of calculating upon the unforeseen, and ready in an emergency to lend a hand himself. I therefore nominated you, and carried through your appointment, in spite of all opposition; it is for you to justify my confidence in you."

"I will justify it," was the decided reply. "You shall not find yourself mistaken in me, Herr President."

"I am seldom deceived in men," said Nordheim, with a searching glance at the young man's countenance, "and of your technical capacity you have given proof sufficient. Your plan for bridging over the Wolkenstein chasm shows genius."

"Herr President—"

"No need to disclaim my praise, I am usually very chary of it; as a former engineer I can judge of such matters, and I repeat, your plan shows genius."

"And yet for a long time it was not only not accepted, it was entirely disregarded," said Elmhorst, with some bitterness. "Had I not conceived the happy idea of requesting a personal interview with you, at which I explained my plans to you, they never would have been accorded the slightest notice."

"Possibly not; talent out at elbows, with difficulty finds a hearing; 'tis the way of the world, and one from which I, myself, suffered in my youth. But one conquers in the end, and you come off conqueror with your present position. I shall know how to maintain you in it if you do your duty. The rest is your own affair."

He rose, and waved his hand in token of dismissal. Elmhorst also rose, but lingered a moment; "May I make a request?"

"Certainly; what is it?"

"A few weeks ago I had the honour in the city of seeing Fräulein Alice Nordheim, and of being hastily presented to her as she was getting into the carriage with you. She is now, I hear, in Heilborn,—may I be permitted to inquire personally after her health?"

Nordheim was startled, and scanned the bold petitioner keenly. He was wont to have none save business relations with his officials, and was considered very exclusive in his choice of associates, and here was this young man, only a simple engineer a short time previously, asking a favour which signified neither more nor less than the *entrée* of the house of the all-powerful president. It seemed to him a little strong; he frowned and said in a very cold tone, "Your request is a rather bold one, Herr—Elmhorst."

"I know it, but Fortune favours the bold."

The words might have offended another patron, but not the man to whom they were spoken. Influential millionaire as he was, Nordheim had enough of flattery and servility, and despised both from the bottom of his soul. This quiet self-possession, not a whit destroyed by his presence, impressed him; he felt it was something akin to his own nature. 'Fortune favours the bold!' It had been his own maxim by which he had mounted the social ladder, and this Elmhorst looked as if he never would be content with remaining on its lower rounds. The frown vanished from his brow, but his eyes remained fixed upon the young engineer's face as if to read his very soul,—his most secret thoughts. After a pause of a few seconds he said, slowly, "We will admit the proverb to be right this time. Come!"

In Elmhorst's eyes there was a flash of triumph; he bowed low, and followed Nordheim through several rooms to the other wing of the house.

Nordheim was occupying one of the most beautiful and elegant villas in the fashionable spa. Half hidden by the green shade of the shrubberies, it enjoyed a charming prospect of the mountain-range, and its interior was wanting in none of the luxuries to which spoiled and wealthy guests are accustomed. In the drawing-room the glass door alone was open, the jalousies were closed to keep out the glare of sunlight, and in the cool, darkened room sat two ladies.

The elder, who held a book, and was apparently reading, was no longer young. Her dress, from the lace cap covering her gray hair to the hem of her dark silk gown, was scrupulously neat, and she sat up stiff and cool and elegant, an embodiment of the rules of etiquette. The younger, a girl of sixteen at most, a delicate, pale, frail creature, was sitting, or rather reclining, in a large arm-chair. Her head was supported by a silken cushion, and her hands were crossed idly and languidly in the lap of her white, lace-trimmed morning-gown. Her face, although hardly beautiful, was pleasing, but it wore a weary, apathetic expression which made it lifeless when, as at present, the eyes were half closed and the young lady seemed to be dozing.

"Herr Wolfgang Elmhorst," said the president, introducing his companion. "I believe he is not quite a stranger to you, Alice. Frau Baroness Lasberg."

Alice slowly opened her eyes, large brown eyes, which, however, shared the apathetic expression of her other features. There was not the slightest interest in her glance, and she seemed to remember neither the name nor the person of the young man. Frau von Lasberg, on the other hand, looked surprised. Only Wolfgang Elmhurst and nothing more? Gentlemen without rank or title were not wont to be admitted to the Nordheim circle; there surely must be something extraordinary about this young man, since the president himself introduced him. Nevertheless his courteous bow was acknowledged with frigid formality.

"I cannot expect Fräulein Nordheim to remember me," said Wolfgang, advancing. "Our meeting was a very transient one; I am all the more grateful to the Herr President for his introduction to-day. But I fear Fräulein Nordheim is ill?"

"Only rather fatigued from her journey," the president made answer in his daughter's stead. "How are you to-day, Alice?"

"I feel wretched, papa," the young lady replied in a gentle voice, but one quite devoid of expression.

"The heat of the sun in the narrow valley is insufferable," Frau von Lasberg observed. "This sultry atmosphere always has an unfavourable effect upon Alice; I fear she will not be able to bear it."

"The physicians have ordered her to Heilborn, and we must await the result," said Nordheim, in a tone that was impatient rather than tender. Alice said not a word; her strength seemed exhausted by her short reply to her father's inquiry, and she left it to Frau von Lasberg and her father to continue the conversation.

Elmhurst's share in it was at first a very modest one, but gradually and almost imperceptibly he took the lead, and he certainly understood the art of conversation. His remarks were not commonplaces about the weather and every-day occurrences; he talked of things which might have been thought foreign to the interest of the ladies,—things which had to do with the railway enterprise among the mountains. He described the Wolkenstein, its stupendous proportions, its heights which dominated the entire mountain-range, the yawning abyss which the bridge was to span, the rushing mountain-stream, and the iron road which was to wind through cliffs and forests above streams and chasms. His were no dry descriptions, no technical explanations,—he unrolled a brilliant picture of the gigantic undertaking before his listeners, and he succeeded in entralling them. Frau von Lasberg became some degrees less cool and formal; she even asked a few questions, expressing her interest in the matter, and Alice, although she persisted in her silence, evidently listened, and sometimes bestowed a half-surprised glance upon the speaker.

The president seemed equally surprised by the conversational talent of his *protégé*, with whom, hitherto, he had talked about official and technical matters only. He knew that the young man had been bred in moderate circumstances, and that he was unused to 'society' so called, and here he was in this drawing-room conversing with these ladies as if he had been accustomed to such intercourse all his life. And there was an entire absence in his manner of anything like forwardness; he knew perfectly well how to keep within the bounds assigned by good breeding for a first visit.

In the midst of their conversation a servant appeared, and with a rather embarrassed air announced, "A gentleman calling himself Baron Thurgau wishes—"

"Yes, wishes to speak to his illustrious brother-in-law," a loud, angry voice interrupted him, as he was thrust aside by a powerful arm. "Thunder and lightning, what sort of a household have you got here, Nordheim? I believe the Emperor of China is more easy of access than you are! We had to break through three outposts, and even then the betagged and betasselled pack would have denied us admittance. You have brought an entire suite with you."

Alice had started in terror at the sound of the stentorian voice, and Frau von Lasberg rose slowly and solemnly in mute indignation, seeming to ask by her looks the meaning of this intrusion. The president too did not appear to approve of this mode of announcement; but he collected himself immediately and advanced to meet his brother-in-law, who was followed by his daughter.

"Probably you did not at first mention your name," he said, "or such a mistake could not have occurred. The servants do not yet know you."

"Well, there would have been no harm in admitting any simple, honest man to your presence," Thurgau growled, still red with irritation. "But that is not the fashion here, apparently; it was only when I added the 'Baron' that they condescended to admit us."

The servant's error was undeniably excusable, for the Freiherr wore his usual mountaineer's garb, and Erna hardly looked like a young Baroness, although she had not donned her storm-costume to-day. She wore a simple gown of some dark stuff, rather more suitable for a mountain ramble than for paying visits, and as simple a straw hat tied over her curls, which were, however, confined to-day in a silken net, against which they evidently rebelled. She seemed to resent their reception even more than did her father, for she stood beside him with a frown and a haughty curl of the lip, gloomily scanning those present. Behind the pair appeared the inevitable Griff, who had shown his teeth angrily when the servant attempted to shut him out of the room, and who maintained his place in the unshaken conviction that he belonged wherever his mistress was.

The president would have tried to smooth matters, but Thurgau, whose wrath was wont to evaporate as quickly as it was aroused, did not allow him to speak. "There is Alice!" he exclaimed. "God bless you, child, I'm glad to see you again! But, my poor girl, how you look! not a drop of blood in your cheeks. Why, this is pitiful!"

Amid such flattering remarks he approached the young lady to bestow upon her what he considered a tender embrace; but Frau von Lasberg interposed between Alice and himself with, "I beg of you!" uttered in a sharp tone, as if to shield the girl from an assault.

"Come, come, I shall do my niece no harm," Thurgau said, with renewed vexation. "You need not protect her from me as you would a lamb from a wolf. Whom have I the honour of addressing?"

"I am the Baroness Lasberg!" the lady explained, with due emphasis upon the title. Her whole manner expressed frigid reserve, but it availed her nothing here. The Freiherr cordially clasped one of the hands she had extended to ward him off, and shook it until it ached again.

"Extremely happy, madame, extremely so. My name you have heard, and this is my daughter. Come, Erna, why do you stand there so silent? Are you not going to speak to Alice?"

Erna approached slowly, a frown still on her brow, but it vanished entirely at sight of her young cousin lying so weary and pale among her cushions; suddenly with all her wonted eagerness she threw her arms round Alice's neck and cried out, "Poor Alice, I am so sorry you are ill!"

Alice accepted the caress without returning it; but when the blooming, rosy face nestled close to her colourless cheek, when a pair of fresh lips pressed her own, and the warm, tender tones fell on her ear, something akin to a smile appeared upon her apathetic features and she replied, softly, "I am not ill, only tired."

"Pray, Baroness, be less demonstrative," Frau von Lasberg said, coldly. "Alice must be very gently treated; her nerves are extremely sensitive."

"What? Nerves?" said Thurgau. "That's a complaint of the city folks. With us at Wolkenstein Court there are no such things. You ought to come with Alice to us, madame; I'll promise you that in three weeks neither of you will have a single nerve."

"I can readily believe it," the lady replied, with an indignant glance.

"Come, Thurgau, let us leave the children to make acquaintance with each other; they have not seen each other for years," said Nordheim, who, although quite used to his brother-in-law's rough manner, was annoyed by it in the present company. He would have led the way to the next room, but Elmhurst, who during this domestic scene had considerably withdrawn to the recess of a window, now advanced, as if about to take his leave, whereupon the president, of course, presented him to his relative.

Thurgau immediately remembered the name which he had heard mentioned in no flattering fashion by the comrades of the young superintendent, whose attractive exterior seemed only to

confirm the Freiherr in his mistrust of him. Erna too had turned towards the stranger; she suddenly started and retreated a step.

"This is not the first time that I have had the honour of meeting the Baroness Thurgau," said Elmhurst, bowing courteously. "She was kind enough to act as my guide when I had lost my way among the cliffs of the Wolkenstein. Her name, indeed, I hear to-day for the first time."

"Ah, indeed. So this was the stranger whom you met?" growled Thurgau, not greatly edified, it would seem, by this encounter.

"I trust the Baroness was not alone?" Frau von Lasberg inquired, in a tone which betrayed her horror at such a possibility.

"Of course I was alone!" Erna exclaimed, perceiving the reproach in the lady's words, and flaming up indignantly. "I always walk alone in the mountains, with only Griff for a companion. Be quiet, Griff! Lie down!"

Elmhurst had tried to stroke the beautiful animal, but his advances had been met with an angry growl. At the sound of his mistress's voice, however, the dog was instantly silent and lay down obediently at her feet.

"The dog is not cross, I hope?" Nordheim asked, with evident annoyance. "If he is, I must really entreat—"

"Griff is never cross," Erna interposed almost angrily. "He never hurts any one, and always lets strangers pat him, but he does not like this gentleman at all, and—"

"Baroness—I beg of you!" murmured Frau von Lasberg, with difficulty maintaining her formal demeanour. Elmhurst, however, acknowledged Erna's words with a low bow.

"I am excessively mortified to have fallen into disgrace with Herr Griff, and, as I fear, with his mistress also," he declared, "but it really is not my fault. Allow me, ladies, to bid you good-morning."

He approached Alice, beside whom Frau von Lasberg was standing guard, as if to protect her from all contact with these savages who had suddenly burst into the drawing-room, and who could not, unfortunately, be turned out, because, setting aside the relationship, they were Baron and Baroness born.

On the other hand, this young man with the bourgeois name conducted himself like a gentleman. His voice was gentle and sympathetic as he expressed the hope that Fräulein Nordheim would recover her health in the air of Heilborn; he courteously kissed the hand of the elder lady when she graciously extended it to him, and then he turned to the president to take leave of him also, when a most unexpected interruption occurred.

Outside on the balcony, which overhung the garden and was half filled with blossoming shrubs, appeared a kitten, which had probably found its way thither from the garden. It approached the open glass door with innocent curiosity, and, unfortunately, came within the range of Griff's vision. The dog, in his hereditary hostility to the tribe of cats, started up, barking violently, almost overturned Frau von Lasberg, shot past Alice, frightening her terribly, and out upon the balcony, where a wild chase began. The terrified kitten tore hither and thither with lightning-like rapidity without finding any outlet of escape and with its persecutor in close pursuit; the glass panes of the door rattled, the flower-pots were overturned and smashed, and amidst the confusion were heard the Freiherr's shrill whistle and Erna's voice of command. The dog, young, not fully broken, and eager for the chase, did not obey,—the hurly-burly was frightful.

At last the kitten succeeded in jumping upon the balustrade of the balcony and thence down into the garden. But Griff would not let his prey escape him thus; he leaped after it, overturning as he did so the only flower-pot as yet uninjured, and immediately afterwards there was a terrific barking in the garden, mingled with a child's scream of terror.

All this happened in less than two minutes, and when Thurgau hurried out on the balcony to establish peace it was already too late. Meanwhile, the drawing-room was a scene of indescribable confusion,—Alice had a nervous attack, and lay with her eyes closed in Frau von Lasberg's arms;

Elmhorst, with quick presence of mind, had picked up a cologne-bottle and was sprinkling with its contents the fainting girl's temples and forehead, while the president, scowling, pulled the bell to summon the servants. In the midst of all this the two gentlemen and Frau von Lasberg witnessed a spectacle which almost took away their breath. The young Baroness, the Freifräulein von Thurgau, suddenly stood upon the balustrade of the balcony, but only for an instant, before she sprang down into the garden.

This was too much! Frau von Lasberg dropped Alice out of her arms and sank into the nearest armchair. Elmhorst found himself necessitated to come to her relief also with cologne, which he sprinkled impartially to the right and to the left.

Below in the garden Erna's interference was very necessary. The child whose screams had caused her to spring from the balcony was a little boy, and he held his kitten clasped in his arms, while before him stood the huge dog, barking loudly, without, however, touching the little fellow. The child was in extreme terror, and went on screaming until Erna seized the dog by the collar and dragged him away.

Baron Thurgau, meanwhile, stood quietly on the balcony observing the course of affairs. He knew that the child would not be hurt, for Griff was not at all vicious. When Erna returned to the house with the culprit, now completely subdued, while the child unharmed ran off with his kitten, the Freiherr turned and called out in stentorian tones to his brother-in-law in the drawing-room, "There! did I not tell you, Nordheim, that my Erna was a grand girl?"

## CHAPTER III. EXPLANATORY

President Nordheim belonged to the class of men who owe their success to themselves. The son of a petty official, with no means of his own, he had educated himself as an engineer, and had lived in very narrow circumstances until he suddenly appeared before the public with a technical invention which attracted the attention of the entire profession. The first mountain-railway had just been projected, and the young, obscure engineer had devised a locomotive which could drag the trains up the heights. The invention was as clever as it was practical; it instantly distanced all competing devices, and was adopted by the company, which finally purchased the patent from the inventor at a price which then seemed a fortune to him, and which certainly laid the foundation of his future wealth, for he took rank immediately among men of enterprise.

Contrary to expectation, however, Nordheim did not pursue the path in which he had made so brilliant a *début*; strangely enough, he seemed to lose interest in it, and adopted another, although kindred, career. He undertook the formation and the financial conduct of a large building association, of which in a few years he made an enormous success, meanwhile increasing his own property tenfold.

Other projects were the consequence of this first undertaking, and with the increase of his means the magnitude of his schemes increased, and it became clear that this was the field for the exercise of his talents. He was not a man to ponder and pore for years over technical details,—he needed to plunge into the life of the age, to venture and contrive, making all possible interests subservient to his success, and developing in all directions his great talent for organization.

In his restless activity he never failed to select the right man for the right place; he overcame all obstacles, sought and found sources of help everywhere, and fortune stood his energy in stead. The enterprises of which Nordheim was the head were sure to succeed, and while he himself became a millionaire, his influence in all circles with which he had any connection was incalculable.

The president's wife had died a few years since,—a loss which was not especially felt by him, for his marriage had not been a very happy one. He had married when he was a simple engineer, and his quiet, unpretending wife had not known how to accommodate herself to his growing fortunes and to play the part of *grande dame* to her husband's satisfaction. Then too the son which she bore him, and whom he had hoped to make the heir of his schemes, died when an infant. Alice was born some years afterwards, a delicate, sickly child, for whose life the greatest anxiety was always felt, and whose phlegmatic temperament was antagonistic to the vivid energy of her father's nature. She was his only daughter, his future heiress, and as such he surrounded her with every luxury that wealth could procure, but she made no part of his life, and he was glad to intrust her education and herself to the Baroness Lasberg.

Nordheim's only sister, who had lived beneath his roof, had bestowed her hand upon the Freiherr von Thurgau, then a captain in the army. Her brother, who had just achieved his first successes, would have preferred another suitor to the last scion of an impoverished noble family, who possessed nothing save his sword and a small estate high up among the mountains, but, since the couple loved each other tenderly and there was no objection to be made to Thurgau personally, the brother's consent was not withheld.

The young people lived very modestly, but in the enjoyment of a domestic happiness quite lacking in Nordheim's wealthy household, and their only child, the little Erna, grew up in the broad sunshine of love and content. Unfortunately, Thurgau lost his wife after six years of married life, and, sensitive as he was, the unexpected blow so crushed him that he determined to leave the army, and to retire from the world entirely. Nordheim, whose restless ambition could not comprehend such a resolve, combated it most earnestly, but in vain; his brother-in-law resisted him with all the obstinacy

of his nature. He quitted the service in which he had attained the rank of major, and retired with his daughter to Wolkenstein Court, the modest income from which, joined to his pension, sufficing for his simple needs.

Since then there had been a certain amount of estrangement between the brothers-in-law; the mediating influence of the wife and sister was lacking, and in addition their homes were very wide apart. They saw each other rarely, and letters were interchanged still more rarely until the construction of the mountain-railway and the necessity for purchasing Thurgau's estate brought about a meeting.

## CHAPTER IV. THE LAST THURGAU

About a week had passed since the visit to Heilborn, when Dr. Reinsfeld again took his way to Wolkenstein Court, but on this occasion he was not alone, for beside him walked Superintendent Elmhurst.

"I never should have dreamed, Wolfgang, that fate would bring us together again here," said the young physician, gaily. "When we parted two years ago, you jeered at me for going into 'the wilderness,' as you were pleased to express yourself, and now you have sought it yourself."

"To bring cultivation to this wilderness," Wolfgang continued the sentence. "You indeed seem very comfortable here; you have fairly taken root in the miserable mountain-village where I discovered you, Benno; I am working here for my future."

"I should think you might be contented with your present." Benno observed. "A superintendent-engineer at twenty-seven,—it would be hard to surpass that. Between ourselves, your comrades are furious at your appointment. Take care, Wolf, or you will find yourself in a wasps'-nest."

"Do you imagine I fear to be stung? I know all you say is true, and I have already given the gentlemen to understand that I am not inclined to tolerate obstacles thrown in my way, and that they must pay me the respect due to a superior. If they want war, they shall have it!"

"Yes, you were always pugnacious; I never could endure to be perpetually upon a war-footing with those about me."

"I know it; you are the same peace-loving old Benno that you always were, who never could say a cross word to anyone, and who consequently was maltreated by his beloved fellow-beings whenever an opportunity offered. How often have I told you that you never could get on in the world so! and to get on in the world is what we all desire."

"You certainly are striding on in seven-league boots," said Reinsfeld, dryly. "You are the acknowledged favourite, they say, of the omnipotent President Nordheim. I saw him again lately at Wolkenstein Court."

"Saw him again? Did you know him before?"

"Certainly, in my boyhood. He and my father were friends and fellow-students; Nordheim used to come to our house daily; I have sat upon his knee often enough when he spent the evening with us."

"Indeed? Well, I hope you reminded him of it when you met him."

"No; Baron Thurgau did not mention my name—"

"And of course you did not do so either," said Wolfgang, laughing. "Just like you! Chance brings you into contact with an influential man whose mere word would procure you an advantageous position, and you never even tell him your name! I shall repair your omission; the first time I see the president I shall tell him—"

"Pray do no such thing. Wolf," Benno interrupted him. "You had better say nothing about it."

"And why not?"

"Because—the man has risen to such a height in life that he might not like to be reminded of the time when he was a simple engineer."

"You do him injustice. He is proud of his humble origin, as all clever men are, and he could not fail to be pleased to be reminded of an early friend."

Reinsfeld gently shook his head. "I am afraid the memory would be a painful one. Something happened later,—I never knew what,—I was a boy at the time; but I know that the breach was complete. Nordheim never came again to our house, and my father avoided even the mention of his name; they were entirely estranged."

"Then of course you could not reckon upon his favour," said Elmhorst, in a disappointed tone. "The president seems to me to be one who never forgives a supposed offence."

"Yes, they say he has grown extremely haughty and domineering. I wonder that you can get along with him. You are not a man to cringe."

"That is precisely why he likes me. I leave cringing and fawning to servile souls who may perhaps thus procure some subordinate position. Whoever wishes really to rise must hold his head erect and keep his eyes fixed upon the goal above him, or he will continue to crawl on the ground."

"I suppose your goal is a couple of millions," Benno said, ironically. "You never were very modest in your plans for the future. What do you wish to be? The president of your company?"

"Perhaps so at some future time; for the present only his son-in-law."

"I thought there was something of the kind in your mind!" exclaimed Benno, bursting into a laugh. "Of course you are sure to be right, Wolf; but why not rather pluck down yonder sun from the sky? It would be quite as easy."

"Do you fancy I am in jest?" asked Wolfgang, coolly.

"Yes, I do take that liberty, for you cannot be serious in aspiring to the daughter of a man whose wealth and consequence are almost proverbial. Nordheim's heiress may choose among any number of Freiherrns and Counts, if indeed she does not prefer a millionaire."

"Then all the Freiherrns and Counts must be outdone," said the young engineer, calmly, "and that is what I propose to do."

Dr. Reinsfeld suddenly paused and looked at his friend with some anxiety; he even made a slight movement as if to feel his pulse.

"Then you are either a little off your head or in love," he remarked, with decision. "For a lover nothing is impossible, and this visit to Heilborn seems to be fraught with destiny for you. My poor boy, this is very sad."

"In love?" Wolfgang repeated, a smile of ineffable contempt curling his lip. "No, Benno, you know I never have either time or inclination to think of love, and now less than ever. But do not look so shocked, as if I were talking high treason. I give you my word that Alice Nordheim, if she marries me, shall never repent it. She shall have the most attentive and considerate of husbands."

"Indeed you must forgive me for finding all this calculation most sordid," the young physician burst forth indignantly. "You are young and gifted; you have attained a position for which hundreds would envy you, and which relieves you from all care; the future lies open before you, and all you think of is the pursuit of a wealthy wife. For shame, Wolfgang!"

"My dear Benno, you do not understand," Wolfgang declared, enduring his friend's reproof with great serenity. "You idealists never comprehend that we must take into account human nature and the world. You will, of course, marry for love, spend your life slaving laboriously in some obscure country town to procure bread for your wife and children, and at last sink noiselessly into the grave with the edifying consciousness that you have been true to your ideal. I am of another stripe,—I demand of life everything or nothing."

"Well, then, in heaven's name win it by your own exertions!" exclaimed Benno, growing every moment more and more indignant. "Your grand model, President Nordheim, did it."

"He certainly did, but it took him more than twenty years. We are now slowly and laboriously plodding up this mountain-road in the sweat of our brows. Look at that winged fellow there!" He pointed to a huge bird of prey circling above the abyss. "His wings will carry him in a few minutes to the summit of the Wolkenstein. Yes, it must be fine to stand up there and see the whole world at his feet, and to be near the sun. I do not choose to wait for it until I am old and gray. I wish to mount *now* and, rely upon it, I shall dare the flight sooner or later."

He drew himself up to his full height; his dark eyes flashed, his fine features were instinct with energy and ambition. The man impressed you as capable of venturing a flight of which others would not even dream.

There was a sudden rustling among the larches on the side of the road, and Griff came bounding down from above, and leaped about the young physician in expectation of the wonted caress. His mistress also appeared on the height, following the course which the dog had taken, springing down over stones and roots of trees, directly through the underbrush, until at last, with glowing cheeks, she reached the road.

Frau von Lasberg would certainly have found some satisfaction in the manner in which the greeting of the Herr Superintendent was returned, with all the cool dignity becoming a Baroness Thurgau, while a contemptuous glance was cast at the elegance of the young man's costume.

Elmhorst wore to-day an easy, loose suit bearing some similitude to the dress of a mountaineer, and very like that of his friend, but it became him admirably; he looked like some distinguished tourist making an expedition with his guide. Dr. Reinsfeld with his negligent carriage certainly showed to disadvantage beside that tall, slender figure; his gray jacket and his hat were decidedly weather-worn, but that evidently gave him no concern. His eyes sparkled with pleasure at sight of the young girl, who greeted him with her wonted cordial familiarity.

"You are coming to us, Herr Doctor, are you not?" she asked.

"Of course, Fräulein Erna; are you all well?"

"Papa was not well this morning, but he has nevertheless gone shooting. I have been to meet him with Griff, but we could not find him; he must have taken another way home."

She joined the two gentlemen, who now left the mountain-road and took the somewhat steep path leading to Wolkenstein Court. Griff seemed scarcely reconciled to the presence of the young engineer: he greeted him with a growl and showed his teeth.

"What is the matter with Griff?" Reinsfeld asked. "He is usually kindly and good-humoured with everybody."

"He does not seem to include me in his universal philanthropy," said Elmhorst, with a shrug. "He has made me several such declarations of war, and his good humour cannot always be depended upon; bestirred up a terrible uproar in Heilborn, in the Herr President's drawing-room, where Fräulein von Thurgau achieved a deed of positive heroism in comforting a little child whom the dog had nearly frightened to death."

"And, meanwhile, Herr Elmhorst applied himself to the succour of the fainting ladies," Erna said, ironically. "Upon my return to the drawing-room I observed his courteous attentions to both Alice and Frau von Lasberg,—how impartially he deluged both with cologne. Oh, it was diverting in the extreme!"

She laughed merrily. For an instant Elmhorst compressed his lips with an angry glance at the girl, but the next he rejoined politely: "You took such instant possession of the heroic part in the drama, Fräulein von Thurgau, that nothing was left for me but my insignificant *rôle*. You cannot accuse me of timidity after meeting me upon the Wolkenstein, although in my entire ignorance of the locality I did not reach the summit."

"And you never will reach it," Reinsfeld interposed. "The summit is inaccessible; even the boldest mountaineers are checked by those perpendicular walls, and more than one foolhardy climber has forfeited his life in the attempt to ascend them."

"Does the mountain-sprite guard her throne so jealously?" Elmhorst asked, laughing. "She seems to be a most energetic lady, tossing about avalanches as if they were snowballs, and requiring as many human sacrifices yearly as any heathen goddess."

He looked up to the Wolkenstein,<sup>1</sup> which justified its title: while all the other mountain-summits were defined clearly against the sky, its top was hidden in white mists.

"You ought not to jest about it, Wolfgang," said the young physician, with some irritation. "You have never yet spent an autumn and winter here, and you do not know her, our wild mountain-sprite,

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<sup>1</sup> "Cloud-stone."

the fearful elemental force of the Alps, which only too frequently menaces the lives and the dwellings of the poor mountaineers. She is feared, not without reason, here in her realm; but you seem to have become quite familiar with the legend."

"Fräulein von Thurgau had the kindness to make me acquainted with the stern dame," said Wolfgang. "She did indeed receive us very ungraciously on the threshold of her palace, with a furious storm, and I was not allowed the privilege of a personal introduction."

"Take care,—you might have to pay dearly for the favour!" exclaimed Erna, irritated by his sarcasm. Elmhorst's mocking smile was certainly provoking.

"Fräulein von Thurgau, you must not expect from me any consideration for mountain-sprites. I am here for the express purpose of waging war against them. The industries of the nineteenth century have nothing in common with the fear of ghosts. Pray do not look so indignant. Our railway is not going over the Wolkenstein, and your mountain-sprite will remain seated upon her throne undisturbed. Of course she cannot but behold thence how we take possession of her realm and girdle it with our chains. But I have not the remotest intention of interfering with your faith. At *your* age it is quite comprehensible."

He could not have irritated his youthful antagonist more deeply than by these words, which so distinctly assigned her a place among children. They were the most insulting that could be addressed to the girl of sixteen, and they had their effect. Erna stood erect, as angry and determined as if she herself had been threatened with fetters; her eyes flashed as she exclaimed, with all the wayward defiance of a child, "I wish the mountain-sprite would descend upon her wings of storm from the Wolkenstein and show you her face,—you would not ask to see it again!"

With this she turned and flew, rather than ran, across the meadow, with Griff after her. The slender figure, its curls unbound again to-day, vanished in a few minutes within the house. Wolfgang paused and looked after her; the sarcastic smile still hovered upon his lips, but there was a sharp tone in his voice.

"What is Baron Thurgau thinking of, to let his daughter grow up so? She would be quite impossible in civilized surroundings; she is barely tolerable in this mountain wilderness."

"Yes, she has grown up wild and free as an Alpine rose," said Benno, whose eyes were still fixed upon the door behind which Erna had disappeared. Elmhorst turned suddenly and looked keenly at his friend.

"You are actually poetical! Are you touched there?"

"I?" asked Benno, surprised, almost dismayed. "What are you thinking of?"

"I only thought it strange to have you season your speech with imagery,—it is not your way. Moreover, your 'Alpine rose' is an extremely wayward, spoiled child; you will have to educate her first."

The words were not uttered as an innocent jest; they had a harsh, sarcastic flavour, and apparently offended the young physician, who replied, irritably, "No more of this, Wolf! Rather tell me what takes you to Wolkenstein Court. You wish to speak with the Freiherr?"

"Yes; but our interview can hardly be an agreeable one. You know that we need the estate for our line of railway; it was refused us, and we had to fall back upon our right of compulsion. The obstinate old Baron was not content: he protested again and again, and refused to allow a survey to be made upon his soil. The man positively fancies that his 'no' will avail him. Of course his protest was laid upon the table, and since the time of probation granted him has expired and we are in possession, I am to inform him that the preliminary work is about to begin."

Reinsfeld had listened in silence with an extremely grave expression, and his voice showed some anxiety as he said, "Wolf, let me beg you not to go about this business with your usual luck of consideration. The Freiherr is really not responsible on this head. I have taken pains again and again to explain to him that his opposition must be fruitless, but he is thoroughly convinced that no one

either can or will take from him his inheritance. He is attached to it with every fibre of his heart, and if he really must relinquish it, I am afraid it will go nigh to kill him."

"Not at all! He will yield like a reasonable man as soon as he sees the unavoidable necessity. I certainly shall be duly considerate, since he is the president's brother-in-law; otherwise I should not have come hither to-day, but have set the engineers to work. Nordheim wishes that everything should be done to spare the old man's feelings, and so I have undertaken the affair myself."

"There will be a scene," said Benno, "Baron Thurgau is the best man in the world, but incredibly passionate and violent when he thinks his rights infringed upon. You do not know him yet."

"You mistake; I have the honour of knowing him, and his primitive characteristics. He gave me an opportunity of observing them at Heilborn, and I am prepared to-day to meet with the roughest usage. But you are right; the man is irresponsible in matters of grave importance, and I shall treat him accordingly."

They had now reached the house, which they entered. Thurgau had just come in; his gun still lay on the table, and beside it a couple of moor-fowl, the result of his morning's sport. Erna had probably advised him of the coming visitors, for he showed no surprise at sight of the young superintendent.

"Well, doctor," he called out to Reinsfeld, with a laugh, "you are just in time to see how disobedient I have been. There lie my betrayers!" He pointed to his gun and the trophies of his chase.

"Your looks would have informed me," Reinsfeld replied, with a glance at the Freiherr's crimson, heated face. "Moreover, you were not well this morning, I hear."

He would have felt Thurgau's pulse, but the hand was withdrawn: "Time enough for that after a while; you bring me a guest."

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you, Herr von Thurgau," said Wolfgang, approaching; "and if I am not unwelcome—"

"As a man you are certainly welcome, as a superintendent-engineer you are not," the Freiherr declared, after his blunt fashion. "I am glad to see you, but not a word of your cursed railway, I entreat, or, in spite of the duties of hospitality, I shall turn you out of doors."

He placed a chair for his guest and took his own accustomed seat. Elmhorst saw at a glance how difficult his errand would be; he felt as a tiresome burden the consideration he was compelled by circumstances to pay, but the burden must be shouldered, and so he began at first in a jesting tone.

"I am aware of what a fierce foe you are to our enterprise. My office is the worst of recommendations in your eyes; therefore I did not venture to come alone, but brought my friend with me as a protection."

"Dr. Reinsfeld is a friend of yours?" asked Thurgau, in whose estimation the young official seemed suddenly to rise.

"A friend of my boyhood; we were at the same school, and afterwards studied at the same university, although our professions differed. I hunted up Benno as soon as I came here, and I trust we shall always be good comrades."

"Yes, we all lived here very pleasantly so long as we were by ourselves," the Freiherr said, aggressively. "When you came here with your cursed railway the worry began, and when the shrieking and whistling begin there will be an end of comfort and quiet."

"Now, papa, you are transgressing your own rule and talking of the railway," Erna cried, laughing. "But you must come with me, Herr Doctor. I want to show you what my cousin Alice has sent me from Heilborn; it is charming."

With the eager impatience of a child, who cannot wait to display its treasures, she carried off the young physician into the next room, thus giving the Herr Superintendent fresh occasion to disapprove of her education, or rather of the want of it. On this point he quite agreed with Frau Lasberg. What sort of way was this to behave towards a young man, were he even ten times a physician and the friend of the family!

Benno as he followed her glanced anxiously at the two left behind; he knew what topic would now be discussed, but he relied upon his friend's talent for diplomacy, and, moreover, the door was left open. If the tempest raged too fiercely, he might interfere.

"Yes, yes, the matter cannot be avoided," the Freiherr growled, and Elmhorst, glad to come to business, took up his words.

"You are quite right, Herr Baron, it will not be ignored, and on peril of your fulfilling your threat and really turning me out of doors, I must present myself to you as the agent of the railway company intrusted with imparting to you certain information. The measurements and surveys upon the Wolkenstein estate cannot possibly be delayed any longer, and the engineers will go to work here in the course of a few days."

"They will do no such thing!" Thurgau exclaimed, angrily. "How often must I repeat that I will not allow anything of the kind upon my property!"

"Upon your property? The estate is no longer your property," said Elmhorst, calmly. "The company bought it months ago, and the purchase-money has been lying ready ever since. That business was finished long ago."

"Nothing has been finished!" shouted the Freiherr, his irritation increasing. "Do you imagine I care a button for judgments that outrage all justice, and which your company procured God only knows by what rascality? Do you suppose I am going to leave my house and home to make way for your locomotives? Not one step will I stir, and if—"

"Pray do not excite yourself thus, Herr von Thurgau," Wolfgang interrupted him. "At present there is no idea of driving you away,—it is only that the preliminary surveys must be begun; the house itself will remain entirely at your disposal until next spring."

"Very kind of you!" Thurgau laughed, bitterly. "Till next spring! And what then?"

"Then, of course, it must go."

The Freiherr was about to burst forth again, but there was something in the young man's cool composure that forced him to control himself. He made an effort to do so, but his colour deepened and his breath was short and laboured, as he said, roughly,—

"Does that seem to you a matter 'of course'? But what can you know of the devotion a man feels for his inheritance? You belong, like my brother-in-law, to the century of steam. He builds himself three—four palaces, each more gorgeous than its predecessor, and in none of them is he at home. He lives in them one day and sells them the next, as the whim takes him. Wolkenstein Court has been the home of the Thurgaus for two centuries, and shall remain so until the last Thurgau closes his eyes, rely—"

He broke off in the midst of his sentence, and, as if suddenly attacked by vertigo, grasped the table, but it was only for a few seconds; angry, as it were, at the unwonted weakness, he stood erect again and went on with ever-increasing bitterness: "We have lost all else; we did not understand how to bargain and to hoard, and gradually all has vanished save the old nest where stood the cradle of our line; to that we have held fast through ruin and disaster. We would sooner have starved than have relinquished it. And now comes your railway, and threatens to raze my house to the ground, to trample upon rights hundreds of years old, and to take from me what is mine by the law of justice and of God! Only try it! I say no,—and again no. It is my last word."

He did indeed look ready to make good his refusal with his life, and another man might either have been silent or have postponed further discussion. But Wolfgang had no idea of anything of the kind; he had undertaken to bring the matter to a conclusion, and he persisted.

"Those mountains outside," he said, gravely, "have been standing longer than Wolkenstein Court, and the forests are more firmly rooted in the soil than are you in your home, and yet they must yield. I am afraid Herr von Thurgau, that you have no conception of the gigantic nature of our undertaking, of the means at its disposal, and of the obstacles it must overcome. We penetrate rocks and forests, divert rivers from their course, and bridge across abysses. Whatever is in our path must

give way. We come off victorious in our battle with the elements. Ask yourself if the will of one man can bar our progress."

A pause of a few seconds ensued. Thurgau made no reply; his furious anger seemed dissipated by the invincible composure of his opponent, who confronted him with perfect respect and an entire adherence to courtesy. But his clear voice had an inexorable tone, and the look which encountered that of the Freiherr with such cold resolve seemed to cast a spell upon Thurgau. He had hitherto shown himself entirely impervious to all persuasion, all explanation; he had, with all the obstinacy of his character, intrenched himself behind his rights, as impregnable, in his estimation, as the mountains themselves. To-day for the first time it occurred to him that his antagonism might be shattered, that he might be forced to succumb to a power that had laid its iron grasp thus upon the mountains. He leaned heavily upon the table again and struggled for breath, while speech seemed denied him.

"You may rest assured that we shall proceed with all possible regard for you," Wolfgang began again. "The preliminary work which we are about to undertake will scarcely disturb you, and during the winter you will be entirely unmolested; the construction of the road will not begin until the spring, and then, of course—"

"I must yield, you think," Thurgau interposed, hoarsely.

"Yes, you *must*, Herr Baron," said Elmhurst, coldly.

The fateful word, the truth of which instantly sank into his consciousness, robbed the Freiherr of the last remnant of composure; he rebelled against it with a violence that was almost terrifying, and that might well have caused a doubt as to his mental balance.

"But I will not,—will not, I tell you!" he gasped, almost beside himself "Let rocks and mountains make way before you, *I* will not yield. Have a care of our mountains, lest, when you are so arrogantly interfering with them, they rush down upon you and shatter all your bridges and structures like reeds. I should like to stand by and see the accursed work a heap of ruins; I should like—"

He did not finish his sentence, but convulsively clutched at his breast; his last word died away in a kind of groan, and on the instant the mighty frame fell prostrate as if struck by lightning.

"Good God!" exclaimed Dr. Reinsfeld, who had appeared at the door of the next room just as the last sentences were being uttered, and who now hurried in. But Erna was before him; she first reached her father, and threw herself down beside him with a cry of terror.

"Do not be distressed, Fräulein Erna," said the young physician, gently pushing her aside, while with Elmhurst's help he raised the unconscious man and laid him on the sofa. "It is a fainting-fit,—an attack of vertigo such as the Herr Baron had a few weeks ago. He will recover from this too."

The young girl had followed him, and stood beside him with her hands convulsively clasped and her eyes riveted upon the face of the speaker. Perhaps she saw there something that contradicted the consoling words.

"No, no!" she gasped. "You are deceiving me; this is something else! Papa! papa! it is I. Do you not know your Erna?"

Benno made no rejoinder, but tore open Thurgau's coat; Elmhurst would have helped him, but Erna thrust away his hand with violence.

"Do not touch him!" she exclaimed, in half-stifled accents. "You have killed him, you have brought ruin to our household. Leave him! I will not let you even touch his hand!"

Wolfgang involuntarily recoiled and looked in dismay that was almost terror at the girl, who at this moment was no longer a child. She had thrown herself before her father with outspread arms as if to shield and defend him, and her eyes flashed with savage hatred as though she were confronting a mortal foe.

"Go, Wolfgang," Reinsfeld said in a low tone, as he led him away. "The poor child in her anguish is unjust, and, moreover, you must not stay. The Baron may possibly recover consciousness, and if so he must not see you."

"May recover?" Elmhurst repeated. "Do you fear—"

"The worst! Go, and send old Vroni here; she must be somewhere in the house. Wait outside, and I will bring you tidings as soon as possible."

With these whispered words he conducted his friend to the door. Wolfgang silently obeyed; he sent into the room the old maid-servant, whom he found in the hall, and then went out into the open air, but there was a dark cloud on his brow. Who could have foreseen such an issue!

A quarter of an hour might have elapsed, when Benno Reinsfeld again made his appearance. He was very pale, and his eyes, usually so clear, were suffused.

"Well?" Wolfgang asked, quickly.

"It is all over!" the young physician replied in an undertone. "A stroke of apoplexy, undoubtedly mortal. I saw that at once."

Wolfgang was apparently unprepared for this reply; his lips quivered as he said in a strained voice, "The affair is intensely painful, Benno, although I am not in the least to blame. I went to work with the greatest caution. The president must be informed."

"Certainly; he is the only near relative, so far as I know. I shall stay with the poor child, who is suffering intensely. Will you undertake to send a messenger to Heilborn?"

"I will drive over myself to inform Nordheim. Farewell."

"Farewell," said Benno, as he returned to the house.

Wolfgang turned to go, but suddenly paused and walked slowly to the window, which was half open.

Within the room Erna was on her knees, with her hands clasped about her father's body. The passionate man who had been standing here but one short quarter of an hour ago in full vigour, obstinately resisting a necessity, now lay motionless, all unconscious of the despairing tears of his orphan child. Fate had decreed that his words should be true; Wolkenstein Court had remained in the possession of the ancient race whose cradle it had been until the last Thurgau had closed his eyes forever.

## CHAPTER V. THE LOVER AND THE SUITOR

The house which President Nordheim occupied in the capital bore abundant testimony in its princely magnificence to the wealth of its possessor. It reared its palatial proportions in the most fashionable quarter of the city, and had been built by one of the first architects of the day; there was lavish splendour in its interior arrangements, and a throng of obsequious lackeys was always at hand; in short, nothing was wanting that could minister to the luxurious life of its inmates.

At the head of the household the Baroness Lasberg had held sway for years. Widowed and without means, she had been quite willing to accept such a position in the establishment of the wealthy parvenu to whom she had been recommended by some one of her highborn relatives. Here she was perfectly free to rule as she pleased, for Nordheim, with all his strength of will, could not but regard it as a great convenience to have a lady of undoubted birth and breeding control his servants, receive his guests, and supply the place of mother to his daughter and niece. For three years Erna von Thurgau had now been living beneath the roof of her uncle, who was also her guardian, and who had taken her to his home immediately after the death of her father.

The president was in his study, talking with a gentleman seated opposite him, one of the first lawyers in the city and the legal adviser of the railway company of which Nordheim was president. He seemed also to belong among the intimates of the household, for the conversation was conducted upon a footing of familiarity, although it concerned chiefly business matters.

"You ought to discuss this with Elmhorst personally," said the president. "He can give you every information upon the subject."

"Is he here?" asked the lawyer, in some surprise.

"He has been here since yesterday, and will probably stay for a week."

"I am glad to hear it; our city seems to possess special attractions for the Herr Superintendent; he is often here, it seems to me."

"He certainly is, and in accordance with my wishes. I desire to be more exactly informed with regard to certain matters than is possible by letter. Moreover, Elmhorst never leaves his post unless he is certain that he can be spared; of that you may be sure, Herr Gersdorf."

Herr Gersdorf, a man of about forty, very fine-looking, with a grave, intellectual face, seemed to think his words had been misunderstood, for he smiled rather ironically as he rejoined, "I certainly do not doubt Herr Elmhorst's zeal in the performance of duty. We all know he would be more apt to do too much than too little. The company may congratulate itself upon having secured in its service so much energy and ability."

"It certainly is not owing to the company that it is so," said Nordheim, with a shrug. "I had to contest the matter with energy when I insisted upon his nomination, and his position was at first made so difficult for him, that any other man would have resigned it. He met with determined hostility on all sides."

"But he very soon overcame it," said Gersdorf, dryly. "I remember the storm that raged among his fellow-officials when he assumed authority over them, but they gradually quieted down. The Herr Superintendent is a man of unusual force of character, and has contrived to gather all the reins into his own hand in the course of the last three years. It is pretty well known now that he will tolerate no one as his superior or even equal in authority, save only the engineer-in-chief, who is now entirely upon his side."

"I do not blame him for his ambition," the president said, coolly. "Whoever wishes to rise must force his way. My judgment did not play me false when it induced me to confirm in so important an office, in spite of all opposition, a man so young. The engineer-in-chief was prejudiced against him,

and only yielded reluctantly. Now he is glad to have so capable a support; and as for the Wolkenstein bridge,—Elmhorst's own work,—he may well take first rank upon its merits."

"The bridge promises to be a masterpiece indeed," Gersdorf assented. "A magnificently bold structure; it will doubtless be the finest thing in the entire line of railway. So you wish me to speak with the superintendent himself; shall I find him at his usual hotel?"

"No, at present you will find him here. I have invited him to stay with us this time."

"Ah, indeed?" Gersdorf smiled. He knew that officials of Elmhorst's rank were sometimes obliged to await Nordheim's pleasure for hours in his antechamber; this young man had been invited to be a guest beneath his roof. Still more wonderful stories were told of his liking for Elmhorst, who had been his favourite from the first.

For the present, however, the lawyer let the matter drop, contenting himself with remarking that he would see Herr Elmhorst shortly. He had other and more important affairs in his head apparently, for he took his leave of the president rather absently, and seemed in no hurry to seek out the young engineer; the card which he gave to the servant in the hall was for the ladies of the house, whom he asked to see.

The reception-rooms were in the second story, where Frau von Lasberg was enthroned in the drawing-room in all her wonted state. Alice was seated near her, very little changed by the past three years. She was still the same frail, pale creature, with a weary, listless expression on her regular features,—a hot-house plant to be guarded closely from every draught of air, an object of unceasing care and solicitude for all around her. Her health seemed to be more firmly established, but there was not a gleam of the freshness or enthusiasm of youth in her colourless face.

There was no want of them, however, to be detected in the young lady seated beside the Baroness Lasberg, a graceful little figure in a most becoming walking-suit of dark blue trimmed with fur. A charming, rosy face looked out from beneath her blue velvet hat; the eyes were dark, and sparkling with mischief, and a profusion of little black curls showed above them. She laughed and talked incessantly with all the vivacity of her eighteen years.

"Such a pity that Erna is out!" she exclaimed. "I had something very important to discuss with her. Not a syllable of it shall you hear, Alice; it is to be a surprise for your birthday. I hope we are to have dancing at your ball?"

"I hardly think so," said Alice, indifferently. "This is March, you know."

"But the middle of winter, nevertheless. It snowed only this morning, and dancing is always delightful." As she spoke, her little feet moved as if ready for an instant proof of her preference. Frau von Lasberg looked at them with disapprobation, and remarked, coldly,—

"I believe you have danced a great deal this winter, Baroness Molly."

"Not nearly enough," the little Baroness declared. "How I pity poor Alice for being forbidden to dance! It is good to enjoy one's youth; when you're married there's an end of it. 'Marry and worry,' our old nurse used to say, and then burst into tears and talk of her dear departed. A mournful maxim. Do you believe in it, Alice?"

"Alice bestows no thought upon such matters," the old lady observed, severely. "I must frankly confess to you, my dear Molly, that this topic seems to me quite unbecoming."

"Oh!" exclaimed Molly "do you consider marriage unbecoming, then, madame?"

"With consent and approval of parents, and a due regard for every consideration,—no."

"But it is just then that it is most tiresome!" the young lady asserted, rousing even Alice from her indifference.

"But, Molly!" she said, reproachfully.

"Baroness Ernsthause is jesting, of course," said Frau von Lasberg, with an annihilating glance. "But even in jest such talk is extremely reprehensible. A young lady cannot be too guarded in her expressions and conduct. Society is, unfortunately, too ready to gossip."

Her words had, perhaps, some concealed significance, for Molly's lips quivered as if longing to laugh, but she replied with the most innocent air in the world,—

"You are perfectly right, madame. Just think, last summer everybody at Heilborn was gossiping about the frequent visits of Superintendent Elmhurst. He came almost every week—"

"To see the Herr President," the old lady interposed. "Herr Elmhurst had made the plans and drawings for the new villa in the mountains and was himself superintending its construction; frequent consultations were unavoidable."

"Yes, everybody knew that, but still they gossiped. They talked about Herr Elmhurst's baskets of flowers and other attentions, and they said—"

"I must really beg you, Baroness, to spare us further details," Frau von Lasberg interposed, rising in indignant majesty. The inconsiderate young lady would probably have received a much longer reprimand had not a servant announced that the carriage was waiting. Frau von Lasberg turned to Alice: "I must go to the meeting of the Ladies' Union, my child, and of course you cannot drive out in this rough weather. Moreover, you seem to be rather out of sorts; I fear—"

A very significant glance completed her sentence, and testified to her earnest desire for the visitor's speedy departure, but quite in vain.

"I will stay with Alice and amuse her," Molly declared, with amiable readiness. "You can go without any anxiety, madame."

Madame compressed her lips in mild despair, but she knew from experience that there was no getting rid of this *enfant terrible* if she had taken it into her head to stay; therefore she kissed Alice's forehead, inclined her head to her young friend, and made a dignified exit.

Scarcely had the door closed after her when Molly danced about like an india-rubber ball with, "Thank God, she has gone, high and mighty old duenna that she is! I have something to tell you, Alice, something immensely important,—that is, I wanted to confide it to Erna, but, unfortunately, she is not here, and so you must help me,—you must! or you will blast forever the happiness of two human beings!"

"Who? I?" asked Alice, who at such a tremendous appeal could not but open her eyes.

"Yes, you; but you know nothing yet. I must explain everything to you, and there goes twelve o'clock, and Albert will be here in a moment,—Herr Gersdorf, I mean. The fact is, he loves me, and I love him, and of course we want to marry each other, but my father and mother will not consent because he is not noble. Good heavens, Alice, do not look so surprised! I learned to know him in your house, and it was in your conservatory that he proposed to me a week ago, when that famous violinist was playing in the music-room and all the other people were listening."

"But—" Alice tried to interpose, but without avail; the little Baroness went on, pouring out the story of her love and her woes.

"Do not interrupt me; I have told you nothing yet. When we went home that evening I told my father and mother that I was betrothed, and that Albert was coming the next day to ask their consent. Oh, what a row there was! Papa was indignant, mamma was outraged, and my granduncle fairly snorted with rage. He is a hugely-important person, my granduncle, because he is so very rich, and we shall have his money. But he must die first, and he has no idea of dying, which is very bad for us, papa says, for we have nothing; papa never makes out with his salary, and my granduncle, while he lives, never will give us a penny. There, now you understand!"

"No, I do not understand at all," said Alice, fairly stupefied by this overwhelming stream of confidence. "What has your granduncle to do with it?"

Molly wrung her hands in despair at this lack of comprehension: "Alice, I entreat you not to be so stupid! I tell you they actually passed sentence upon me. Mamma said she was threatened with spasms at the mere thought of my ever being called Frau Gersdorf; papa insisted that I must not throw myself away, because at some future time I should be a great match, at which my granduncle made a wry face, not much edified by this reference to the heirship, and then he went on to make a greater

row than any one else about the *mésalliance*. He enumerated all our ancestors, who would one and all turn in their graves. What do I care for that? let the old fellows turn as much as they like; it will be a change for them in their tiresome old ancestral vault. Unfortunately, I took the liberty of saying so, and then the storm burst upon me from all three sides at once. My granduncle raised his hand and made a vow, and then I made one too. I stood up before him, so,"—she stamped her foot on the carpet,—and vowed that never, never would I forsake my Albert!"

The little Baroness was forced to stop for a moment to take breath, and she availed herself of this involuntary pause to run to the window, whence came the sound of a carriage rolling away; then flying back again, she exclaimed, "She has gone,—the duenna. Thank God, we are rid of her! She suspects something; I knew it by the remarks with which she favoured me this morning! But she has gone for the present; her meeting will last for at least two hours. I reckoned upon that when I laid my plans. You must know, Alice, that I have been strictly forbidden either to speak or to write to Albert; of course I wrote to him immediately, and I must speak with him besides. So I made an appointment with him here in your drawing-room, and you must be the guardian angel of our love."

Alice did not appear greatly charmed by the part thus assigned her. She had listened to the entire story in a way which positively outraged the eager Molly, without any 'ah's' or 'oh's,' and in mute astonishment that such things could be. A betrothal without, and even against, the consent of parents was something quite outside of the young lady's power of comprehension. Frau von Lasberg's training did not admit of such ideas. So she sat upright, and said, with a degree of decision, "No, that would not be proper."

"What would not be proper? your being a guardian angel?" Molly exclaimed, indignantly. "Are you going to betray my confidence? Do you wish to drive us to despair and death? For we shall die, both of us, if we are parted. Can you answer it to your conscience?"

Fortunately, there was no time to settle this question of conscience, for Herr Gersdorf was announced, and there was a distressing moment of hesitation. Alice really seemed inclined to declare that she was ill and could not receive the visitor, but Molly, in dread of some such disaster, advanced and said aloud and quite dictatorially, "Show Herr Gersdorf in."

The servant vanished, and with a sigh Alice sank back again in her arm-chair. She had done her best, and had tried to resist, but since the words were thus taken out of her mouth she was not called upon for further effort, but must let the affair take its course.

Herr Gersdorf entered, and Molly flew to meet him, ready to be clasped in his arms, instead of which he kissed her hand respectfully, and, still retaining it in his clasp, approached the young mistress of the house.

"First of all, Fräulein Nordheim, I must ask your forgiveness for the extraordinary demands which my betrothed has made upon your friendship. You probably know that, after her consent to be my wife, I wished immediately to procure that of her parents, but Baron Ernsthause has refused to see me."

"And he locked *me* up," Molly interpolated, "for the entire forenoon."

"I then wrote to the Baron," Gersdorf continued, "and made my proposal in due form, but received in return a cold refusal without any statement of his reasons therefor. Baron Ernsthause wrote me—"

"A perfectly odious letter," Molly again interposed, "but my granduncle dictated it. I know he did, for I listened at the keyhole!"

"At all events it was a refusal; but, since Molly has freely accorded me her heart and hand, I shall assuredly assert my rights, and therefore I believed myself justified in availing myself of this opportunity of seeing my betrothed, although without the knowledge of her parents. Once more I entreat your forgiveness, Fräulein Nordheim. Be sure that we shall not abuse your kindness."

It all sounded so frank, so cordial and manly, that Alice began to find the matter far more natural, and in a few words signified her acquiescence. She could not indeed comprehend how this

grave, reserved man, who seemed absorbed in the duties of his profession, had fallen in love with Molly, who was like nothing but quicksilver, nor that his love was returned, but there was no longer any doubt of the fact.

"You need not listen, Alice," Molly said, consolingly. "Take a book and read, or if you really do not feel quite well, lay your head back and go to sleep. We shall not mind it in the least, only do not let us be interrupted."

With which she led the way to the recess of a window half shut off from the room by Turkish curtains looped aside. Here the conversation of the lovers was at first carried on in whispers, but the vivacious little Baroness soon manifested her eagerness by louder tones, so that at last Alice could not choose but hear. She had taken up a book, but it dropped in her lap as the terrible word 'elopement' fell on her ear.

"There is no other way," Molly said, as dictatorially as when she had ordered the servant to admit her lover. "You must carry me off, and it must be the day after to-morrow at half-past twelve. My granduncle leaves for his castle at that time, and my father and mother go with him to the railway-station; they always make so much of him. Meanwhile, we can slip off conveniently. We'll travel as far as Gretna Green, wherever that is,—I have read that there are no tiresome preliminaries to be gone through with there,—and we can return as man and wife. Then all my dead ancestors may stand on their heads, and so may my granduncle, for that matter, if I may only belong to you."

This entire scheme was advanced in a tone of assured conviction, but it did not meet with the expected approval; Gersdorf said, gravely and decidedly,—

"No, Molly, that will not do."

"Not? Why not?"

"Because there are laws and injunctions which expressly forbid such romantic excursions. Your fanciful little brain has no conception as yet of life and its duties; but I know them, and it would ill become me, whose vocation it is to defend the law, to trample it underfoot."

"What do I care for laws and injunctions?" said Molly, deeply offended by this cool rejection of her romantic scheme. "How can you talk of such prosaic things when our love is at stake? What are we to do if papa and mamma persist in saying no?"

"First of all we must wait until your granduncle has really gone home. There is nothing to be done with that stiff old aristocrat; in his eyes I, as a man without a title, am perfectly unfitted to woo a Baroness Ernsthause. As soon as his influence is no longer present in your household I shall surely have an interview with your father, and shall try to overcome his prejudice; it will be no easy task, but we must have patience and wait."

The little Baroness was thunderstruck at this declaration, this utter ruin of all her air-built castles. Instead of the romantic flight and secret marriage of which she had dreamed, here was her lover counselling patience and prudence; instead of bearing her off in his arms, he talked as if he were ready to institute legal proceedings for her possession. It was altogether too much, and she burst out angrily, "You had better declare at once that you do not care for me, after all; that you have not the courage to win me. You talked very differently before we were betrothed. But I give you back your troth; I will part from you forever; I—" Here she began to sob. "I will marry some man with no end of ancestors whom my granduncle approves of, but I shall die of grief, and before the year is out I shall be in my grave."

"Molly!"

"Let go my hand!" But he held it fast.

"Molly, look at me! Do you seriously doubt my love?"

This was the tender tone which Molly remembered only too well,—the tone in which the words had been spoken that evening in the fragrant, dim conservatory, to which she had listened with a throbbing heart and glowing cheeks. She stopped sobbing and looked up through her tears at her lover as he bent above her.

"Darling Molly, have you no confidence in me? You have given yourself to me, and I shall keep you for my own in spite of all opposition. Be sure I shall not let my happiness be snatched from me, although some time may pass before I can carry home my little wife."

It sounded so fervent, so faithful, that Molly's tears ceased to flow; her head leaned gently on her lover's shoulder, and a smile played about her lips, as she asked, half archly, half distrustfully, "But, Albert, we surely shall not have to wait until you are as old as my granduncle?"

"No, not nearly so long, my darling," Albert replied, kissing away a tear from the long lashes, "for then, wayward child that you are, ready to fly off if I do not obey your will on the instant, you would have nothing to say to me."

"Oh, yes, I should, however old you were!" exclaimed Molly. "I love you so dearly, Albert!"

Again the voices sank to whispers, and the close of the conversation was inaudible. In about five minutes the lovers advanced again into the drawing-room, just in time to meet the Herr Superintendent Elmhorst, who, as the guest of the house, entered unannounced.

Wolfgang had gained much in personal appearance during the last three years; his features had grown more decided and manly, his bearing was prouder and more resolute. The young man who when we saw him last had but just placed his foot on the first round of the ladder, which he was determined to ascend, had now learned to mount and to command, but in spite of the consciousness of power, which was revealed in his entire air, there was nothing the least offensive in his demeanour; he seemed to be one whose superiority of nature had involuntarily asserted itself.

He had brought with him a bunch of lovely flowers, which he presented with a few courteous words to the young mistress of the house. There was no need of an introduction to Gersdorf, who had often seen him, and Molly had made his acquaintance at Heilborn, where she had passed the preceding summer. There was some general conversation, but Gersdorf took his leave shortly, and ten minutes afterwards Molly too departed. She would have been glad to stay, to pour out her heart to Alice, but this Herr Elmhorst did not seem at all inclined to go; indeed, in spite of all his courtesy the little Baroness could not help feeling that he considered her presence here superfluous; she took her leave, but said to herself as she passed down the staircase, "There's something going on there."

She was perhaps right, but the 'something' did not make very rapid progress. Alice smelled at her bouquet of camellias and violets, but looked very listless the while. The wealthy heiress, who had always been the object of devoted attention on all sides, had been loaded with flowers, and took no special pleasure in them. Wolfgang sat opposite her and entertained her after his usual interesting fashion; he talked of the new villa which Nordheim had had built in the mountains and which the family were to occupy for the first time the coming summer.

"The interior arrangements will all be complete before you arrive," he said. "The house itself was finished in the autumn, and the vicinity of the line of railway made it possible for me to superintend everything personally. You will soon feel at home among the mountains, Fräulein Nordheim."

"I know them already," said Alice, still trifling with her flowers. "We go to Heilborn regularly every summer."

"Merely a summer promenade, with the mountains for a background," Elmhorst said. "Those are not the mountains which you will learn to know in your new home; the situation is magnificent, and I flatter myself that you will be pleased with the home itself. It is indeed only a simple mountain-villa, but as such I was expressly ordered to construct it."

"Papa says it is a little masterpiece of architecture," Alice remarked, quietly.

Wolfgang smiled and, as if accidentally, moved his chair a little nearer: "I should be very glad to acquit myself well as an architect. It is not exactly my *métier*, but *you* were to occupy the villa, Fräulein Alice, and I could not leave it to other hands. I obtained permission from the president to build the little mountain-home, which he tells me he intends shall be your special property."

The significance of his words was sufficiently plain, as was also his intimation of her father's approval, but the young lady neither blushed nor seemed confused; she merely said, with her usual indifferent lassitude,—

"Yes, papa means the villa shall be a present to me; therefore he did not wish me to see it until it was entirely finished. It was very kind of you, Herr Elmhorst, to undertake its construction."

"Pray do not praise me," Wolfgang hastily interposed. "On the contrary, it was rank selfishness that caused me to thrust myself forward in the matter. Every architect asks to be paid, and the recompense for which I sue may well seem to you presumptuous. Nevertheless may I speak—may I ask of you what it has long been in my heart to entreat?"

Alice slowly raised her large brown eyes to his with an inquiring expression that was almost melancholy and that seemed fain to read the truth in the young man's resolute face. She read there eager expectation, but nothing more, and the questioning eyes were again veiled beneath their long lashes. She made no reply.

Wolfgang seemed to consider her silence as an encouragement; he arose and approached her chair, as he went on: "My request is a bold one, I know it, but 'Fortune favours the bold.' So I told the Herr President when I first besought of him the honour of an introduction to you. It has always been my motto, and I cling to it to-day. Will you listen to me, Alice?"

She slightly inclined her head, and made no resistance when he took her hand and carried it to his lips. He went on, making a formal proposal for her hand in well-chosen, courteous terms, his melodious voice adding greatly to the eloquence of his words. All that was lacking was ardour; this was a suit for her hand, not a declaration of love.

Alice listened mutely in no surprise; it had long been an open secret to her that Elmhorst was her suitor, and she knew, too, that her father, discouraging as he had shown himself hitherto to the advances of other men, favoured Elmhorst's suit. He permitted the young man a freedom of intercourse in his house accorded to no other, and he had frequently expressly declared in his daughter's presence that Wolfgang Elmhorst had a brilliant career before him, worth in his eyes incalculably more than the scutcheons of men of rank, who were fain to rehabilitate the faded splendour of their names with a wife's money. Alice herself was too docile to have any will in the matter; it had been impressed upon her from earliest childhood that a well-bred young lady should marry in accordance with her parents' wishes, and she might have found nothing wanting in this extremely correct proposal had not Molly hit upon the idea of making her the guardian angel of a love-affair.

That scene in the window-recess had been so very different; those whispered tones, caressing, cajoling the wayward girl, whose whole heart seemed, nevertheless, devoted to the grave man so much her senior! With what tenderness he had treated her! This suitor respectfully requested the hand of the wealthy heiress,—her hand: there had been no mention whatever made of her heart.

Wolfgang finished and waited for a reply, then stooped and, looking in her face, said, reproachfully, "Alice, have you nothing to say to me?"

Alice saw clearly that something must be said, but she was unaccustomed to decide for herself, and she made answer, as was befitting a pupil of Frau von Lasberg's,—

"I must first speak with papa; his wishes—"

"I have just left him," Elmhorst interposed, "and I come with his permission and entire approval. May I tell him that my suit has found favour in your eyes? May I present my betrothed to him?"

Alice looked up with the same anxious inquiry in her eyes as before, and replied, softly, "You must have great consideration for me. I have been so ill and wretched all through my childhood that I am still oppressed with a sense of my weakness. You will suffer from it, and I am afraid—"

She broke off, but there was a childlike pathos in her tone, in the entreaty for forbearance from the young heiress, who, with her hand, bestowed a princely fortune. Wolfgang, perhaps, felt this, for for the first time there was something like ardour in his manner as he declared,—

"Do not speak thus, Alice! I know that yours is a delicate temperament needing to be guarded and protected, and I will shield you from every rude contact in life. Trust me, confide your future to me, and I promise you by my—" "love" he was going to say, but his lips refused to utter the falsehood. The man was proud, he might coolly calculate, but he could not feign, and he completed his sentence more slowly,—"by my honour you never shall repent it!"

The words sounded resolute and manly, and he was in earnest. Alice felt this; she laid her hand willingly in his, and submitted to be clasped in his arms. Her suitor's lips touched her own, he expressed his gratitude, his joy, called her his beloved; in short, they were duly betrothed. A trifle only was lacking,—the exultant confession made just before by little Molly amid tears and laughter, 'I love you so dearly, so very dearly!'

## CHAPTER VI. AT PRESIDENT NORDHEIM'S

The reception-rooms of the Nordheim mansion were brilliantly lighted for the celebration not only of the birthday of the daughter of the house, but also of her betrothal. It was a surprising piece of news for society, which, in spite of all reports and gossip, had never seriously believed in the possibility of an alliance so unheard-of. It was incredible that a man, notoriously one of the wealthiest in the country, should bestow his only child upon a young engineer without rank, of unpretending origin, and possessing nothing save distinguished ability, which, to be sure, was warrant for his future.

That it was scarcely an affair of the heart every one knew; Alice had the reputation of great coldness of nature; she was probably incapable of very deep sentiment. Nevertheless she was a most enviable prize, and the announcement of her betrothal caused many a bitter disappointment in aristocratic circles where the heiress had been coveted. This Nordheim, it was clear, did not understand how to prize the privileges which his wealth bestowed upon him. With it he might have purchased a coronet for his daughter, instead of which he had chosen a son-in-law from among the officials of his railway. There was much indignation expressed, nevertheless every one who was invited came to this entertainment. People were curious to see the lucky man who had distanced all titled competitors, and whom fate had so suddenly placed on life's pinnacle, in that he had been chosen as the future lord of millions.

It was just before the beginning of the entertainment when the president with Elmhurst entered the first of the large reception-rooms. He was apparently in the best of humours and upon excellent terms with his future son-in-law.

"You have your first introduction to the society of the capital this evening, Wolfgang," said he. "In your brief visits you have seen only our family. It is time for you to establish relations here, since it will be your future place of residence. Alice is accustomed to the society life of a great city, and you can have no objection to it."

"Of course not, sir," Wolfgang replied. "I like to be at the centre of life and activity, but hitherto it has been incompatible with the duties of my profession. That it will not be so in the future I see from your example. You conduct from here all your various undertakings."

"This activity, however, is beginning to oppress me," said Nordheim. "I have latterly felt the need of a support, and I depend upon your partially relieving me. For the present you are indispensable in the completion of the railway line; the engineer-in-chief, in his present state of feeble health, is the head of the work only in name."

"Yes, it is in fact entirely in my hands, and if he retires,—I know he is thinking seriously of doing so,—I have your promise, sir, that I shall succeed him?"

"Assuredly, and this time I am not afraid of meeting with any opposition. It is, to be sure, the first time that so young a man has been placed at the head of such an undertaking, but you have shown your ability in the Wolkenstein bridge, and the position can scarcely be refused to my future son-in-law."

"In admitting me to your family, Herr Nordheim, you give me much.—I know it," said Elmhurst, gravely; "in return I can give you only a son."

The president's eyes rested thoughtfully upon the face of the speaker, and with an access of warmth extremely rare in the man of business, he replied, "I had an only son, in whom all my hopes were centred; he died in early childhood, and I have often reflected bitterly that some spendthrift idler would probably scatter abroad what I had taken such pains to accumulate. I think better of you; you will continue and preserve what I have begun, complete what I leave unfinished. I am glad to make you my intellectual as well as my material heir."

"I will not disappoint you," Wolfgang said, pressing the hand extended to him.

Here were two kindred natures, but surely the conversation was a strange one for the evening of a betrothal and while awaiting a promised bride. Both men had spoken of their schemes and undertakings; Alice had not been mentioned. The father had demanded of his future son-in-law much, but there had been no allusion to his daughter's happiness; and the lover, who seemed entirely sensible of the advantages of the family connection in prospect, never mentioned the name of his betrothed. They talked of construction and bridges, of the engineer-in-chief and the railway company, as coolly and in as business-like a fashion as if the matter in question were a partnership to be formed between them; and in fact it was nothing else,—either could easily have foregone the additional relationship. They were interrupted, however: a servant entered to ask for orders from the president with relation to the arrangement of the table, and Nordheim thought best to betake himself to the dining-hall to decide the matter. It was still too early for the arrival of the guests, and the ladies of the house had not yet made their appearance. The servants were all at their posts, and for the moment Wolfgang was left alone in the reception-rooms, which occupied the entire upper story of the mansion.

From the large apartment where he was, with its rich crimson rugs and velvet hangings, and its profusion of gilding, he could look through the entire suite of rooms, the splendour of which was most striking in their present deserted, empty condition. Everywhere there was a lavish wealth of costly objects, everywhere pictures, statues, and other works of art, each one worth a small fortune, and the long suite ended, as in some fairy realm, in a dimly-lit conservatory filled with exotic plants of rare magnificence. In an hour these brilliant, fragrant apartments would be crowded with the most distinguished society of the capital, all ready to accept the hospitality of the railway king.

Wolfgang stood still and looked slowly about him. It was indeed a bewildering sensation, that of knowing himself a son of this house, the future heir of all this magnificence. No one could blame the young man if at the thought he stood proudly erect, while his eyes gleamed exultantly. He had kept the vow made to himself,—he had executed the bold scheme which he had once confided to his friend,—he had dared the flight and had reached the summit. At an age when others are beginning to shape their future he had clutched success in a firm grasp. He was now standing upon the height of which he had dreamed, and the world lay fair indeed at his feet.

The drawing-room door opened; Elmhurst turned and advanced a few steps towards it, then paused suddenly, for instead of his expected betrothed Erna von Thurgau entered. She was much changed since she had been met by the strayed young superintendent among the cliffs of the Wolkenstein. The wayward child who had grown up free and untrammelled among her mountains had not without result passed three years in her uncle's luxurious home, under the training of Frau von Lasberg. The little Alpine rose had been transformed to a young lady, who with perfect grace but also with entire formality returned Wolfgang's salutation. This was a beautiful woman, a gloriously beautiful woman.

Her childish features had become perfectly regular, and although the rich bloom of health still coloured her cheek, her face expressed a degree of cool gravity unknown to the joyous daughter of the Freiherr von Thurgau. Her eyes no longer laughed as of old; there lay hidden in their depths a mystery akin to that of the mountain-lakes of her home, whose colour they had borrowed,—a mystery as powerfully attractive as that of the lakes themselves. She looked singularly lovely as she stood in the full light of the chandelier, dressed in pure mist-like white, her only ornaments single water-lilies scattered here and there among its whiteness. Her hair no longer fell in masses about her shoulders, but fashion permitted its full luxuriance to be appreciated, and pale lily-buds gleamed amid its waves.

"Alice and Frau von Lasberg will be here presently," she said, as she entered. "I thought my uncle was here."

"He has gone for a moment to the dining-hall," Elmhurst replied, after a salutation quite as formal as her own.

For an instant Erna seemed about to follow her uncle, but, apparently recollecting that this might be discourteous towards a future relative, she paused and let her gaze wander through the long suite of rooms.

"I think you see these rooms fully lighted to-night for the first time, Herr Elmhurst? They are very fine, are they not?"

"Very fine; and upon one coming, as I do, from the winter solitude of the mountains, they produce a dazzling impression."

"They dazzled me too when I first came here," the young lady said, indifferently; "but one easily becomes accustomed to such surroundings, as you will find by experience when you take up your residence here. It is settled that you are to be married in a year, is it not?"

"It is,—next spring."

"Rather a long time to wait. Have you really consented to such a period of probation?"

The lover seemed, oddly enough, to be rather averse to this allusion to his marriage. He examined with apparent interest a huge porcelain vase which stood near him, and replied, evidently desirous of changing the subject, "I cannot but consent, since for the present I am master neither of my time nor of my movements. The first thing to be attended to is the completion of the railway, of the construction of which I am superintendent."

"Are you, then, so fettered?" Erna asked, with gentle irony. "I should have thought you would find it easy to liberate yourself?"

"Liberate myself,—from what?"

"From a profession which you must certainly resign in the future."

"Do you consider that as a matter of course, Fräulein von Thurgau?" Wolfgang asked, nettled by her tone. "I cannot see what should induce such a course on my part."

"Why, your future position as the husband of Alice Nordheim."

The young engineer flushed crimson; he glanced angrily at the girl who ventured to remind him that he was marrying money. She was smiling, and her remark sounded like a jest, but her eyes spoke a different language, the language of contempt, which he understood but too well. He was not a man, however, to rest quietly under the scorn which pursues a fortune-hunter; he too smiled, and rejoined, with cool courtesy, "Pardon me, Fräulein von Thurgau, you are mistaken. My profession, my work, are necessities of existence for me. I was not made for an idle, inactive enjoyment of life. This seems incomprehensible to you—"

"Not at all," Erna interposed. "I perfectly understand how a true man must depend solely upon his own exertions."

Wolfgang bit his lip, but he parried this thrust too: "That I may accept as a compliment, for I certainly depended entirely upon my own exertions when I planned the Wolkenstein bridge, and I trust my work will bring me credit, even as 'the husband of Alice Nordheim.' But excuse me; these are matters which cannot interest a lady."

"They interest me," Erna said, bluntly. "My home was destroyed by the Wolkenstein bridge, and your work demanded yet another and far dearer sacrifice of me."

"Which you never can forgive me, I know," Wolfgang went on. "You reproach me for an unhappy accident, although your sense of justice must tell you that I am not to blame, that I do not deserve it."

"I do not blame you, Herr Elmhurst."

"You did in that most wretched hour, and you do it still."

Erna did not reply, but her silence was eloquent enough. Elmhurst appeared to have expected a denial, if only a formal one, for there was an added bitterness in his tone as he continued: "I regret infinitely that I should have been the one chosen to conduct the last business arrangements with Baron Thurgau. They had to be made, and their tragic conclusion lay beyond human foresight. It was not I,

Fräulein Thurgau, but iron necessity that required of you the sacrifice of your home; the Wolkenstein bridge is not less guilty than I am."

"I know it," Erna observed, coldly; "but there are cases in which one finds it impossible to be just,—you should see that, Herr Elmhurst. You are now a member of our family, and may rest assured that I shall show you all the consideration due to a relative; for my feelings I cannot be called to account."

Wolfgang looked her full and darkly in the face: "In other words, you detest my work and—myself?"

Erna was silent: she had long outgrown the childish waywardness that had once prompted her to tell the stranger to his face that she could not endure him or his sneers at her mountain-legends. The young lady never dreamed of conduct so unbecoming, and she confronted him now in entire self-possession. But her eyes had not forgotten their language, and at this moment they declared that the girlish nature was quelled only in appearance,—it still slumbered untamed in the depths of her soul. There was a lightning-flash in them which uttered a quick, vehement 'yes' in answer to Wolfgang's last question, although the lips were mute.

It was impossible for Elmhurst to misunderstand it, and yet he gazed into the blue depths of those hostile eyes as if they had the power to hold him spell-bound; only for a few seconds, however, for Erna turned away, saying, lightly, "We certainly are having a very odd conversation, talking of sacrifice, blame, and hatred, and all on the day of your betrothal."

"You are right, Fräulein Thurgau; let us talk of something else," Wolfgang rejoined.

But they did not talk of anything else; on the contrary, an oppressive silence ensued. Erna seated herself and became apparently absorbed in an examination of the pictures on her fan, while her companion walked to the door of the next room as if to admire its magnificence. His face, however, no longer showed the proud satisfaction which had informed it a quarter of an hour before: he looked irritated and ill at ease.

Again the drawing-room door opened and Alice and Frau von Lasberg entered, the latter with a certain air of resignation; a darling wish of hers was to be frustrated to-night. She had looked forward to seeing Alice, whom she had trained entirely according to her own ideas, enrolled in the ranks of the aristocracy, and one of the young girl's distinguished suitors, the scion of an ancient noble line, had enjoyed the Baroness's special favour, and now Wolfgang Elmhurst was carrying off the prize! He was indeed the only man without a title whom Frau von Lasberg could have forgiven for so doing,—he had long since succeeded in winning her regard,—but it was nevertheless a painful fact that a man so perfectly well-bred, so agreeable to the strict old lady, possessed not the ghost of a title.

Alice, in a pale-blue satin gown rather overtrimmed with costly lace, and with a long train, did not look particularly well. The heavy folds of the rich material seemed to weigh down her delicate figure, and the diamonds sparkling on her neck and arms—her father's birthday gift to her—did not avail to relieve her want of colour. Such a frame did not suit her; an airy flower-trimmed ball-dress would have been much more becoming.

Wolfgang hastened to meet his betrothed, and carried her hand to his lips. He was full of tender consideration for her, and he was courtesy itself to the Baroness Lasberg, but the cloud did not vanish from his brow until the president returned and the guests began to arrive. Gradually the rooms were filled with a brilliant assemblage. Those present were indeed the foremost in the capital, the aristocracy by birth and by talent, those distinguished both in the world of finance and in the domain of art, the best names in military and diplomatic circles. Splendid uniforms alternated with costly toilets, and the throng glittered and rustled as only such an assemblage can,—an assemblage thoroughly in keeping with the magnificence of the Nordheim establishment.

The centre of attraction was found in the betrothed pair, or rather in the lover, who, an entire stranger to most of those present, was doubly an object of interest. He certainly was an extremely handsome man, this Wolfgang Elmhurst, no one could deny that, and there was no doubt of his

capacity and his talent, but these gifts alone hardly entitled him to the hand of a wealthy heiress, who might well look for something more. And then, too, the young man appeared to take his good fortune, which would have fairly intoxicated any one else, quite as a matter of course. Not the slightest embarrassment betrayed that this was the first time he had been thus surrounded. With his betrothed's hand resting on his arm he stood proudly calm beside his future father-in-law, was presented to every one, received and acknowledged with easy grace all congratulations, and played admirably the principal part thus assigned him. He was entirely the son of the house, accepting his position as such as a foregone conclusion, and even at times seeming to dominate the entire assembly.

Among the guests was the Court-Councillor von Ernsthäuser, a stiff, formal bureaucrat, who in the absence of his wife had his daughter on his arm. The little Baroness was charming in her pink tulle ball-dress, with a wreath of snow-drops on her black curls, and she was beaming with delight and exultation in having, after a hard combat, succeeded in being present at the entertainment. Her parents had at first refused to allow her to come, because Herr Gersdorf was also invited, and they dreaded the renewal of his attentions. The Herr Papa was armed to the teeth against attack from the hostile force; he kept guard like a sentinel over his daughter, and seemed resolved that she should not leave his side during the entire evening.

But the lover showed no inclination to expose himself to the danger of another repulse; he contented himself with a courteous salutation from a distance, which Baron Ernsthäuser returned very stiffly. Molly inclined her head gravely and decorously, as if quite agreed with her paternal escort; of course she had devised the plan of her campaign, and she proceeded to carry it out with an energy that left nothing to be desired.

She embraced and congratulated Alice, which necessitated her leaving her father's arm; then she greeted Frau von Lasberg with the greatest amiability in return for a very cool recognition on that lady's part, and finally she overwhelmed Erna with demonstrations of affection, drawing her aside to the recess of a window. The councillor looked after her with a discontented air, but, as Gersdorf remained quietly at the other end of the room, he was reassured, and apparently conceived that his office of guardian was perfectly discharged by keeping the enemy constantly in sight. He never suspected the cunning schemes that were being contrived and carried out behind his back.

The whispered interview in the window-recess did not last long, and at its close Fräulein von Thurgau vanished from the room, while Molly returned to her father and entered into conversation with various friends. She managed, however, to perceive that Erna returned after a few minutes, and, approaching Herr Gersdorf, addressed him. He looked rather surprised, but bowed in assent, and the little Baroness triumphantly unfurled her fan. The action had begun, and the guardian was checkmated for the rest of the evening.

Meanwhile, the president had missed his niece and was looking about for her rather impatiently, while talking with a gentleman who had just arrived, and who was not one of the *habitués* of the house. He was undoubtedly a person of distinction, for Nordheim treated him with a consideration which he accorded to but few individuals. Erna no sooner made her appearance again than her uncle approached her and presented the stranger.

"Herr Ernst Waltenberg, of whom you have heard me speak."

"I was so unfortunate as to miss the ladies when I called yesterday, and so am an entire stranger to Fräulein von Thurgau," said Waltenberg.

"Not quite: I talked much of you at dinner," Nordheim interposed. "A cosmopolitan like yourself, who after the tour of the world comes to us directly from Persia, cannot fail to interest, and I am sure you will find an eager listener to your experiences of travel in my niece. Her taste is decidedly for the strange and unusual."

"Indeed, Fräulein von Thurgau?" asked Waltenberg, gazing in evident admiration at Erna's lovely face.

Nordheim perceived this and smiled, while, without giving his niece a chance to reply, he continued:

"You may rely upon it. But we must first of all try to make you more at home in Europe, where you are positively a stranger. I shall be glad if my house can in any wise contribute to your pleasure; I pray you to believe that you will always be welcome here."

He shook his guest's hand with great cordiality and retired. There was a degree of intention in the way in which he had brought the pair together and then left them to themselves, but Erna did not perceive it. She had been in no wise interested in the presentation of the new-comer,—strangers from beyond the seas were no rarity in her uncle's house,—but her first glance at the guest's unusual type of countenance aroused her attention.

Ernst Waltenberg was no longer young,—he had passed forty, and although not very tall his frame was muscular and well-knit, showing traces, however, of a life of exposure and exertion. His face, tanned dark brown by his sojourn for years in tropical countries, was not handsome, but full of expression and of those lines graven not by years, but by experience of life. His broad brow was crowned by close black curls, and his steel-gray eyes beneath their black brows could evidently flash on occasion. There was something strangely foreign about him that set him quite apart from the brilliant but mostly uninteresting personages that crowded Nordheim's rooms. His voice too had a peculiar intonation,—it was deep, but sounded slightly foreign, possibly from years of speaking other tongues than his own. Evidently he was perfectly versed in the forms of society; the manner in which he took his seat beside Fräulein von Thurgau was entirely that of a man of the world.

"You have but lately come from Persia?" Erna asked, referring to what her uncle had said.

"Yes, I was there last; for ten years I have not seen Europe before."

"And yet you are a German? Probably your profession kept you away thus long?"

"My profession?" Waltenberg repeated, with a fleeting smile. "No; I merely yielded to my inclination. I am not of those steadfast natures which become rooted in house and home. I was always longing to be out in the world, and I gratified my desire absolutely in this respect."

"And in all these ten years have you never been homesick?"

"To tell the truth, no! One gradually becomes weaned from one's home, and at last feels like a stranger there. I am here now only to arrange various business affairs and personal matters, and do not propose to stay long. I have no family to keep me here; I am quite alone."

"But your country should have a claim upon you," Erna interposed.

"Perhaps so; but I am modest enough to imagine that it does not need me. There are so many better men than I here."

"And do you not need your country?"

The remark was rather an odd one from a young lady, and Waltenberg looked surprised, especially when the glance that met his own emphasized the reproach in the girl's words.

"You are indignant at my admission, Fräulein Thurgau, but nevertheless I must plead guilty," he said, gravely. "Believe me, a life such as mine has been for years, free of all fetters, surrounded by a nature lavish in beauty and luxuriance, while our own is meagre enough, has the effect of a magic draught. Those who have once tasted it can never again forego it. Were I really obliged to return to this world of unrealities, this formal existence in what we call society, beneath these gray wintry skies, I think I—but this is rank heresy in the eyes of one who is an admired centre of this same society."

"And yet she can perhaps understand you," Erna said, with a sudden access of bitterness. "I grew up among the mountains, in the magnificent solitude of the highlands, far from the world and its ways, and it is hard, very hard, to forego the sunny, golden liberty of my childhood!"

"Even here?" Waltenberg asked, with a glance about him at the brilliant rooms, now crowded with guests.

"Most of all here."

The answer was low, scarcely audible, and the look that accompanied it was strangely sad and weary, but the next moment the young girl seemed to repent the half-involuntary confession; she smiled and said, jestingly,—

"You are right, this is heresy, and my uncle would disapprove; he evidently hopes to make you really at home among us. Let me make you acquainted with the gentleman now approaching us; he is one of our celebrities and will surely interest you."

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