ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

THE BENEFACTRESS

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The Benefactress

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Man bedarf der Leitung
Und der männlichen Begleitung.

Wilhelm Busch.

CHAPTER I

When Anna Estcourt was twenty-five, and had begun to wonder whether the pleasure extractable from life at all counterbalanced the bother of it, a wonderful thing happened.

She was an exceedingly pretty girl, who ought to have been enjoying herself. She had a soft, irregular face, charming eyes, dimples, a pleasant laugh, and limbs that were long and slender. Certainly she ought to have been enjoying herself. Instead, she wasted her time in that foolish pondering over the puzzles of existence, over those unanswerable whys and wherefores, which is as a rule restricted, among women, to the elderly and plain. Many and various are the motives that impel a woman so to ponder; in Anna's case the motive was nothing more exalted than the perpetual presence of a sister-in-law. The sister-in-law was rich—in itself a pleasing circumstance; but the sister-in-law was also frank, and her husband and Anna were entirely dependent on her, and her richness and her frankness combined urged her to make fatiguingly frequent allusions to the Estcourt poverty. Except for their bad taste her husband did not mind these allusions much, for he considered that he had given her a full equivalent for her money in bestowing his name on a person who had practically none: he was Sir Peter Estcourt of the Devonshire Estcourts, and she was a Dobbs of Birmingham. Besides, he was a philosopher, and philosophers never mind

anything. But Anna was in a less agreeable situation. She was not a philosopher, she was thin-skinned, she had bestowed nothing and was taking everything, and she was of an independent nature; and an independent nature, where there is no money, is a great nuisance to its possessor.

When she was younger and more high-flown she sometimes talked of sweeping crossings; but her sister-in-law Susie would not hear of crossings, and dressed her beautifully, and took her out, and made her dance and dine and do as other girls did, being of opinion that a rich husband of good position was more satisfactory than crossings, and far more likely to make some return for all the expenses she had had.

At eighteen Anna was so pretty that the perfect husband seemed to be a mere question of days. What could the most desirable of men, thought Susie, considering her, want more than so bewitching a young creature? But he did not come, somehow, that man of Susie's dreams; and after a year or two, when Anna began to understand what all this dressing and dancing really meant, and after she had had offers from people she did not like, and had herself fallen in love with a youth of no means who was prudent enough to marry somebody else with money, she shrank back and grew colder, and objected more and more decidedly to Susie's strenuous private matrimonial urgings, and sometimes made remarks of a cynical nature to her admirers, who took fright at such symptoms of advancing age, and fell off considerably in numbers.

It was at this period, when she was barely twenty-two, that she spoke of crossings. Susie had seriously reproved her for not meeting the advances of an old and rich and single person with more enthusiasm, and had at the same time alluded to the number of pounds she had spent on her every year for the last three years, and the necessity for putting an end, by marrying, to all this outlay; and instead of being sensible, and talking things over quietly, Anna had poured out a flood of foolish sentiments about the misery of knowing that she was expected to be nice to every man with money, the intolerableness of the life she was leading, and the superior attractions of crossing-sweeping as a means of earning a livelihood.

"Why, you haven't enough money for the broom," said Susie impatiently. "You can't sweep without a broom, you know. I wish you were a little less silly, Anna, and a little more grateful. Most girls would jump at the splendid opportunity you've got now of marrying, and taking up a position of your own. You talk a great deal of stuff about being independent, and when you get the chance, and I do all I can to help you, you fly into a passion and want to sweep a crossing. Really," added Susie, twitching her shoulder, "you might remember that it isn't all roses for me either, trying to get some one else's daughter married."

"Of course it isn't all roses," said Anna, leaning against the mantelpiece and looking down at her with perplexed eyebrows. "I am very sorry for you. I wish you weren't so anxious to get rid of me. I wish I could do something to help you. But you know,

Susie, you haven't taught me a trade. I can't set up on my own account unless you'll give me a last present of a broom, and let me try my luck at the nearest crossing. The one at the end of the street is badly kept. What do you think if I started there?" What answer could anyone make to such folly?

By the time she was twenty-four, nearly all the girls who had come out when she did were married, and she felt as though she were a ghost haunting the ball-rooms of a younger generation. Disliking this feeling, she stiffened, and became more and more unapproachable; and it was at this period that she invented excuses for missing most of the functions to which she was invited, and began to affect a simplicity of dress and hair arrangement that was severe. Susie's exasperation was now at its height. "I don't know why you should be bent on making the worst of yourself," she said angrily, when Anna absolutely refused to alter her hair.

"I'm tired of being frivolous," said Anna. "Have you an idea how long those waves took to do? And you know how Hilton talks. It all gets whisked up now in two minutes, and I'm spared her conversation."

"But you are quite plain," cried Susie. "You are not like the same girl. The only thing your best friend could say about you now is that you look clean."

"Well, I like to look clean," said Anna, and continued to go about the world with hair tucked neatly behind her ears; her immediate reward being an offer from a clergyman within the

next fortnight.

Peter Estcourt was even more surprised than his wife that Anna had not made a good match years before. Of course she had no money, but she was a pretty girl of good family, and it ought to be easy enough for her to find a husband. He wished heartily that she might soon be happily married; for he loved her, and knew that she and Susie could never, with their best endeavours, be great friends. Besides, every woman ought to have a home of her own, and a husband and children. Whenever he thought of Anna, he thought exactly this; and when he had reached the proposition at the end he felt that he could do no more, and began to think of something else.

His marriage with Susie, a person of whom no one had ever heard, had brought out and developed stores of unsuspected philosophy in him. Before that he was quite poor, and very merry; but he loved Estcourt, and could not bear to see it falling into ruin, and he loved his small sister, who was then only ten, and wished to give her a decent education, and what is a man to do? There happened to be no rich American girls about at that time, so he married Miss Dobbs of Birmingham, and became a philosopher.

It was hard on Susie that he should become a philosopher at her expense. She did not like philosophers. She did not understand their silent ways, and their evenness of temper. After she had done all that Peter wanted in regard to the place in Devonshire, and had provided Anna with every luxury in the shape of governesses, and presented her husband with an heir to

the retrieved family fortunes, she thought that she had a right to some enjoyment too, to some gratification from her position, and was surprised to find how little was forthcoming. Really no one could do more than she had done, and yet nothing was done for her. Peter fished, and read, and was with difficulty removable from Estcourt. Anna was, of course, too young to be grateful, but there she was, taking everything as a matter of course, her very unconsciousness an irritation. Susie wanted to get on in the world, and nobody helped her. She wanted to bury the Dobbs part of herself, and develop the Estcourt part; but the Dobbs part was natural, and the Estcourt superficial, and the Dobbses were one and all singularly unattractive—a race of eager, restless, wiry little men and women, anxious to get as much as they could, and keep it as long as they could, a family succeeding in gathering a good deal of money together in one place, and failing entirely in the art of making friends. Susie was the best of them, and had been the pretty one at home; yet she was not in the least a success in London. She put it down to Peter's indifference, to his slowness in introducing her to his friends. It was no more Peter's fault than it was her own. It was not her fault that she was not pretty—there never had been a beautiful Dobbs—and it was not her fault that she was so unfortunately frank, and never could and never did conceal her feverish eagerness to make desirable acquaintances, and to get into desirable sets. Until Anna came out she was invited only to the big functions to which the whole world went; and the hours she passed at them were not among the

most blissful of her life. The people who were at first inclined to be kind to her for Peter's sake, dropped off when they found how her eagerness to attract the attention of some one mightier made her unable to fix her thoughts on the friendly remarks that they were taking pains to make. In society she was absent-minded, fidgety, obviously on the look-out for a chance of drawing the biggest fish into her little net; but, wealthy as she was, she was not wealthy enough in an age of millionnaires, and not once during the whole of her career was a big fish simple enough to be caught.

After a time her natural shrewdness and common sense made her perceive that her one claim to the scanty attentions she did receive was her money. Her money had bought her Peter, and a pleasant future for her children; it had converted a Dobbs into an Estcourt; it had given her everything she had that was worth anything at all. Once she had thoroughly realised this, she began to attach a tremendous importance to the mere possession of money, and grew very stingy, making difficulties about spending that grieved Peter greatly; not because he ever wanted her money now that Estcourt had been restored to its old splendour and set going again for their boy, but because meanness about money in a woman was something he could not comprehend—something repulsive, unfeminine, contrary to her nature as he had always understood it. He left off making the least suggestion about Anna's education or the household arrangements; everything that was done was done of Susie's own accord; and he spent more and more time in Devonshire, and grew more and more

philosophical, and when he did talk to his wife, restricted his conversation to the language of abstract wisdom.

Now this was very hard on Susie, who had no appreciation of abstract wisdom, and who lived as lonely a life as it is possible to imagine. Peter kept out of her way. Anna was subject to prolonged fits of chilly silence. Susie used, at such times, to think regretfully of the cheerful Dobbs days, of their frank and congenial vulgarity.

When Anna was eighteen, Susie's prospects brightened for a time. Doors that had been shut ever since she married, opened before her on her appearing with such a pretty *débutante* under her wing, and she could enjoy the reflected glory of Anna's little triumphs. And then, without any apparent reason, Anna had altered so strangely, and had disappointed every one's expectations; never encouraging the right man, never ready to do as she was told, exasperatingly careless on all matters of vital importance, and ending by showing symptoms of freezing into something of the same philosophical state as Peter. Their mother had been German–a lady-in-waiting to one of the German princesses; and their father had met her and married her while he was secretary at the English Embassy in St. Petersburg. And Susie, who had heard of German philosophy and German stolidity, and despised them both with all her heart, concluded that the German strain was accountable for everything about Peter and Anna that was beyond her comprehension; and sometimes, when Peter was more than usually wise and

unapproachable, would call him Herr Schopenhauer—which had an immediate effect of producing a silence that lasted for weeks; for not only did he like her least when she was playful, but he had, as a matter of fact, read a great deal of Schopenhauer, and was uneasily conscious that it had not been good for him.

While Peter fished, and meditated on the vanity of human wishes at Estcourt, Anna, with rare exceptions, was wherever Susie was, and Susie was wherever it was fashionable to be. For a week or two in the summer, for a day or two at Easter, they went down to Devonshire; and Anna might wander about the old house and grounds as she chose, and feel how much better she had loved it in its tumble-down state, the state she had known as a child, when her mother lived there and was happy. Everything was aggressively spruce now, indoors and out. Susie's money and Susie's taste had rubbed off all the mellowness and all the romance. Anna was glad to leave it again, and be taken to Marienbad, or any place where there was royalty, for Susie loved royalty. But what a life it was, going round year after year with Susie! London, Devonshire, Marienbad, Scotland, London again, following with patient feet wherever the unconscious royalties led, meeting the same people, listening to the same music, talking the same talk, eating the same dinners—would no one ever invent anything new to eat? The inexpressible boredom of riding up and down the Row every morning, the unutterable hours shopping and trying on clothes, the weariness of all the new pictures, and all the concerts, and all the operas, which seemed

to grow less pleasing every year, as her eye and ear grew more critical. She knew at last every note of the stock operas and concerts, and every note seemed to have got on to her nerves.

And then the people they knew—the everlasting sameness of them, content to go the same dull round for ever. Driving in the Park with Susie, neither of them speaking a word, she used to watch the faces in the other carriages, nearly all faces of acquaintances, to see whether any of them looked cheerful; and it was the rarest thing to come across any expression but one of blankest boredom. Bored and cross, hardly ever speaking to the person with them, their friends drove up and down every afternoon, and she and Susie did the same, as silent and as bored as any of them. A few unusually beautiful, or unusually witty, or unusually young persons appeared to find life pleasant and looked happy, but they avoided Susie. Her set was made up of the dull and plain; and all the amusing people, and all the interesting people, turned their backs with one accord on her and it.

These were the circumstances that drove Anna to reflect on the problems of life every time she was beyond the sound of Susie's voice.

She passionately resented her position of dependence on Susie, and she passionately resented the fact that the only way to get out of it was to marry. Every time she had an offer, she first of all refused it with an energy that astonished the unhappy suitor, and then spent days and nights of agony because she had refused it, and because Susie wanted her to accept it, and because of an

immense pity for Susie that had taken possession of her heart. How could Peter live so placidly at Susie's expense, and treat her with such a complete want of tenderness? Anna's love for her brother diminished considerably directly she began to understand Susie's life. It was such a pitiful little life of cringing, and pushing, and heroically smiling in the face of ill-treatment. No one cared for her in the very least. She had hundreds of acquaintances, who would eat her dinners and go away and poke fun at her, but not a single friend. Her husband lived on her and hardly spoke to her. Her boy at Eton, an amazing prig, looked down on her. Her little daughter never dreamed of obeying her. Anna herself was prevented by some stubborn spirit of fastidiousness, evidently not possessed by any of her contemporaries, from doing the only thing Susie had ever really wanted her to do—marrying, and getting herself out of the way. What if Susie were a vulgar little woman of no education and no family? That did not make it any the more glorious for the Estcourts to take all they could and ignore her existence. It was, after all, Susie who paid the bills. Anna pitied her from the bottom of her heart; such a forlorn little woman, taken out of her proper sphere, and left to shiver all alone, without a shred of love to cover and comfort her.

It was when she was away from Susie that she felt this. When she was with her, she found herself as cold and quiet and contradictory as Peter. She used, whenever she got the chance, to go to afternoon service at St. Paul's. It was the only place and time in which all the bad part of her was soothed into quiet, and the

good allowed to prevail in peace. The privacy of the great place, where she never met anyone she knew, the beauty of the music, the stateliness of the service offered every day in equal perfection to any poor wretch choosing to turn his back for an hour on the perplexities of life, all helped to hush her grievances to sleep and fill her heart with tenderness for those who were not happy, and for those who did not know they were unhappy, and for those who wasted their one precious life in being wretched when they might have been happy. How little it would need, she thought (for she was young and imaginative), to turn most people's worries and sadness into joy. Such a little difference in Susie's ways and ideas would make them all so happy; such a little change in Peter's habits would make his wife's life radiant. But they all lived blindly on, each day a day of emptiness, each of those precious days, so crowded with opportunities, and possibilities, and unheeded blessings, and presently life would be behind them, and their chances gone for ever.

"The world is a dreadful place, full of unhappy people," she thought, looking out on to the world with unhappy eyes. "Each one by himself, with no one to comfort him. Each one with more than he can bear, and no one to help him. Oh, if I could, I would help and comfort everyone that is sad, or sick at heart, or sorry —oh, if I could!"

And she dreamed of all that she would do if she were Susie—rich, and free from any sort of interference—to help others, less fortunate, to be happy too. But, since she was the very reverse

of rich and free, she shook off these dreams, and made numbers of good resolutions instead—resolutions bearing chiefly on her future behaviour towards Susie. And she would come out of the church filled with the sternest resolves to be ever afterwards kind and loving to her; and the very first words Susie uttered would either irritate her into speeches that made her sorry, or freeze her back into her ordinary state of cold aloofness.

If Susie had had an idea that Anna was pitying her, and making good resolutions of which she was the object at afternoon services, and that in her eyes she had come to be merely a cross which must with heroism be borne, she probably would have been indignant. Pitying people and being pitied oneself are two very different things. The first is soothing and sweet, the second is annoying, or even maddening, according to the temperament of the patient. Susie, however, never suspected that anyone could be sorry for her; and when, after a party, before they went to bed, Anna would put her arms round her and give her a disproportionately tender kiss, she would show her surprise openly. "Why, what's the matter?" she would ask. "Another mood, Anna?" For she could not know how much Anna felt the snubs she had seen her receive. How should she? She was so used to them that she hardly noticed them herself.

It was when Anna was twenty-five, and much vexed in body by efforts to be and to do as Susie wished, and in soul by those unanswerable questions as to the why and wherefore of the aimless, useless existence she was leading, that the wonderful

thing happened that changed her whole life.

CHAPTER II

There was a German relation of Anna's, her mother's brother, known to Susie as Uncle Joachim. He had been twice to England; once during his sister's life, when Anna was little, and Peter was unmarried, and they were all poor and happy together at Estcourt; and once after Susie's introduction into the family, just at that period when Anna was beginning to stiffen and put her hair behind her ears.

Susie knew all about him, having inquired with her usual frankness on first hearing of his existence whether he would be likely to leave Anna anything on his death; and upon being informed that he had a family of sons, and large estates and little money, looked upon it as a great hardship to be obliged to have him in her London house. She objected to all Germans, and thought this particular one a dreadful old man, and never wearied of making humorous comments on his clothes and the oddness of his manners at meals. She was vexed that he should be with them in Hill Street, and refused to give dinners while he was there. She also asked him several times if he would not enjoy a stay at Estcourt, and said that the country was now at its best, and the primroses were in full beauty.

"I want not primroses," said Uncle Joachim, who seldom spoke at length; "I live in the country. I will now see London."

So he went about diligently to all the museums and picture-

galleries, sometimes alone and sometimes with Anna, who neglected her social duties more than ever in order to be with him, for she loved him.

They talked together chiefly in German, Uncle Joachim carefully correcting her mistakes; and while they went frugally in omnibuses to the different sights, and ate buns in confectioners' shops at lunch-time, and walked long distances where no omnibuses were to be found—for besides having a great fear of hansoms he was very thrifty—he drew her out, saying little himself, and in a very short time knew almost as much about her life and her perplexities as she did.

She was very happy during his visit, and told herself contentedly that blood, after all, was thicker than water. She did not stop to consider what she meant exactly by this, but she had a vague notion that Susie was the water. She felt that Uncle Joachim understood her better than anyone had yet done; and was it not natural that her dear mother's brother should? And it was only after she had taken him to service at St. Paul's that she began to perceive that there might perhaps be points on which their tastes differed. Uncle Joachim had remained seated while other people knelt or stood; but that did not matter in that liberal place, where nobody notices the degree of his neighbour's devoutness. And he had slept during the anthem, one of those unaccompanied anthems that are sung there with what seem of a certainty to be the voices of angels. And on coming out, when a fugue was rolling in glorious confusion down the echoing

aisles, and Anna, who preferred her fugues confused, felt that her spirit was being caught up to heaven, he had looked at her rapt face and wet eyelashes, and patted her hand very kindly, and said encouragingly, "In my youth I too cultivated Bach. Now I cultivate pigs. Pigs are better."

Anna's mother had been his only sister, and he had come over, not, as he told Susie, to see London, but to see Susie herself, and to find out how it was that Anna had reached an age that in Germany is the age of old maids without marrying. By the time he had spent two evenings in Hill Street he had formed his opinion of his nephew and his nephew's wife, and they remained fixed until his death. "The good Peter," he said suddenly one day to Anna when they were wandering together in the maze at Hampton Court—for he faithfully went the rounds of sightseeing prescribed by Baedeker, and Anna followed him wherever he went—"the good Peter is but a *Quatschkopf*."

"A *Quatschkopf*?" echoed Anna, whose acquaintance with her mother-tongue did not extend to the byways of opprobrium. "What in the world is a *Quatschkopf*?"

"*Quatschkopf* is a *Duselfritz*," explained Uncle Joachim, "and also it is the good Peter."

"I believe you are calling him ugly names," said Anna, slipping her arm through his; by this time, if not kindred spirits, they were the best of friends.

Uncle Joachim did not immediately reply. They had come to the open space in the middle of the maze, and he sat down

on the seat to recover his breath, and to wipe his forehead; for though the wind was cold the sun was fierce. "*Gott, was man Alles durchmacht auf Reisen!*" he sighed. Then he put his handkerchief back into his pocket, looked up at Anna, who was standing in front of him leaning on her sunshade, and said, "A *Quatschkopf* is a foolish fellow who marries a woman like that."

"Oh, poor Susie!" cried Anna, at once ready to defend her, and full of the kindly feelings absence invariably produced. "Peter did a very sensible thing. But I don't think Susie did, marrying Peter."

"He is a *Quatschkopf*," said Uncle Joachim, not to be shaken in his opinions, "and the *geborene* Dobbs is a vulgar woman who is not rich enough."

"Not rich enough? Why, we are all suffocated by her money. We never hear of anything else. It would be dreadful if she had still more."

"Not rich enough," persisted Uncle Joachim, pursing up his lips into an expression of great disapproval, and shaking his head. "Such a woman should be a millionnaire. Not of marks, but of pounds sterling. Short of that, a man of birth does not impose her as a mother on his children. Peter has done it. He is a *Quatschkopf*."

"It is a great mercy that she isn't a millionnaire," said Anna, appalled by the mere thought. "Things would be just the same, except that there would be all that money more to hear about. I hate the very name of money."

"Nonsense. Money is very good."

"But not somebody else's."

"That is true," said Uncle Joachim approvingly. "One's own is the only money that is truly pleasant." Then he added suddenly, "Tell me, how comes it that you are not married?"

Anna frowned. "Now you are growing like Susie," she said.

"*Ach*—she asks you that often?"

"Yes—no, not quite like that. She says she knows why I am not married."

"And what knows she?"

"She says that I frighten everybody away," said Anna, digging the point of her sunshade into the ground. Then she looked at Uncle Joachim, and laughed.

"What?" he said incredulously. This pretty creature standing before him, so soft and young—for that she was twenty-four was hardly credible—could not by any possibility be anything but lovable.

"She says that I am disagreeable to people—that I look cross—that I don't encourage them enough. Now isn't it simply terrible to be expected to encourage any wretched man who has money? I don't want anybody to marry me. I don't want to buy my independence that way. Besides, it isn't really independence."

"For a woman it is the one life," said Uncle Joachim with great decision. "Talk not to me of independence. Such words are not for the lips of girls. It is a woman's pride to lean on a good husband. It is her happiness to be shielded and protected by him.

Outside the narrow circle of her home, for her happiness is not. The woman who never marries has missed all things."

"I don't believe it," said Anna.

"It is nevertheless true."

"Look at Susie—is she so happy?"

"I said a *good* husband; not a *Duselfritz*."

"And as for narrow circles, why, how happy, how gloriously happy, I could be outside them, if only I were independent!"

"Independent—independent," repeated Uncle Joachim testily, "always this same foolish word. What hast thou in thy head, child, thy pretty woman's head, made, if ever head was, to lean on a good man's shoulder?"

"Oh—good men's shoulders," said Anna, shrugging her own, "I don't want to lean on anybody's shoulder. I want to hold my head up straight, all by itself. Do you then admire limp women, dear uncle, whose heads roll about all loose till a good man comes along and props them up?"

"These are English ideas. I like them not," said Uncle Joachim, looking stony.

Anna sat down on the seat by his side, and laid her cheek for a moment against his sleeve. "This is the only good man's shoulder it will ever lean on," she said. "If I were a preacher, do you know what I would preach?"

"Thou art not, and never wilt be, a preacher."

"But if I were? Do you know what I would preach? Early and late? In season and out of it?"

"Much nonsense, I doubt not."

"I would preach independence. Only that. Always that. They would be sermons for women only; and they would be warnings against props."

She sat up and looked at him out of the corners of her eyes, but he continued to stare stonily into space.

"I would thump the cushions, and cry out, 'Be independent, independent, independent! Don't talk so much, and do more. Go your own way, and let your neighbour go his. Don't meddle with other people when you have all your own work cut out for you being good yourself. Shake off all the props–'"

"Anna, thou art talking folly."

"'—shake them off, the props tradition and authority offer you, and go alone—crawl, stumble, stagger, but go alone. You won't learn to walk without tumbles, and knocks, and bruises, but you'll never learn to walk at all so long as there are props.' Oh," she said fervently, casting up her eyes, "there is nothing, nothing like getting rid of one's props!"

"I never yet," observed Uncle Joachim, in his turn casting up his eyes, "saw a girl who so greatly needs the guidance of a good man. Hast thou never loved, then?" he added, turning on her suddenly.

"Yes," replied Anna promptly. If Uncle Joachim chose to ask such direct questions she would give him straight answers.

"But–?"

"He went away and married somebody else. I had no money,

and she had a great deal. So you see he was a very sensible young man." And she laughed, for she had long ago ceased to be anything but amused by the remembrance of her one excursion into the rocky regions of love.

"That," said Uncle Joachim, "was not true love."

"Oh, but it was."

"Nay. One does not laugh at love."

"It was all I had, anyhow. There isn't any more left. It was very bad while it lasted, and it took at least two years to get over it. What things I did to please that young man and appear lovely in his eyes! The hours it took to dress, and get my hair done just right. I endured tortures if I didn't look as beautiful as I thought I could look, and was always giving my poor maid notice. And plots—the way I plotted to get taken to the places where he would be! I never was so artful before or since. Poor Susie was quite helpless. It is a mercy it all ended as it did."

"That," repeated Uncle Joachim, "was not true love."

"Yes, it was."

"No, my child."

"Yes, my uncle. I laugh now, but it was very dreadful at the time."

"Thou art but a goose," he said, shrugging his shoulders; but immediately patted her hand lest her feelings should have been hurt. And, declining further argument, he demanded to be taken to the Great Vine.

It was in this fashion, Anna talking and Uncle Joachim making

brief comments, that he came to know her as thoroughly as though he had lived with her all his life.

Soon after the excursion to Hampton Court a letter came that hurried his departure, to Susie's ill-concealed relief.

"My swines are ill," he informed her, greatly agitated, his fragile English going altogether to pieces in his perturbation; "my inspector writes they perpetually die. God keep thee, Anna," and he embraced her very tenderly, and bending hastily over Susie's hand muttered some conventionalities, and then disappeared into his four-wheeler and out of their lives.

They never saw him again.

"My swines are ill," mimicked Susie, when Anna, feeling that she had lost her one friend, came slowly back into the room, "my swines perpetually die—"

Anna was obliged to go and pray very hard at St. Paul's before she could forgive her.

CHAPTER III

The old man died at Christmas, and in the following March, when Anna was going about more sad and listless than ever, the news came that, though his inherited estates had gone to his sons, he had bought a little place some years before with the intention of retiring to it in his extreme old age, and this little place he had left to his dear and only niece Anna.

She was alone when the letters bringing the news arrived, sitting in the drawing-room with a book in her hands at which she did not look, feeling utterly downcast, indifferent, too hopeless to want anything or mind anything, accepting her destiny of years of days like this, with herself going through them lonely, useless, and always older, and telling herself that she did not after all care. "What does it matter, so long as I have a comfortable bed, and fires when I am cold, and meals when I am hungry?" she thought. "Not to have those is the only real misery. All the rest is purest fancy. What right have I to be happier than other people? If they are contented by such things, I can be contented too. And what does a useless being like me deserve, I should like to know? It was detestably ungrateful of me to have been unhappy all this time."

She got up aimlessly, and looked out of the window into the sunny street, where the dust was racing by on the gusty March wind, and the women selling daffodils at the corner were more battered and blown about and red-eyed than ever. She had often,

in those moments when her whole body tingled with a wild longing to be up and doing and justifying her existence before it was too late, envied these poor women, because they worked. She wondered vaguely now at her folly. "It is much better to be comfortable," she thought, going back to the fire as aimlessly as she had gone to the window, "and it is sheer idiocy quarrelling with a life that other people would think quite tolerable."

Then the door opened, and the letters were brought in—the wonderful letters that struck the whole world into radiance—lying together with bills and ordinary notes on a salver, carried by an indifferent servant, handed to her as though they were things of naught—the wonderful letters that changed her life.

At first she did not understand what it was that they meant, and pored over the cramped German writing, reading the long sentences over and over again, till something suddenly seemed to clutch at her heart. Was this possible? Was this actual truth? Was Uncle Joachim, who had so much objected to her longing for independence, giving it to her with both hands, and every blessing along with it? She read them through again, very carefully, holding them with shaking hands. Yes, it was true. She began to cry, sobbing over them for very love and tenderness, her whole being melted into gratitude and humbleness, awestruck by a sense of how little she had deserved it, dazzled by the thousand lovely colours life, in the twinkling of an eye, had taken on.

There were two letters—one from Uncle Joachim's lawyer, and one from Uncle Joachim himself, written soon after his

return from England, with directions on the envelope that it was to be sent to Anna after his death.

Uncle Joachim was not a man to express sentiment otherwise than by patting those he loved affectionately on the back, and the letter over which Anna hung with such tender gratitude, and such an extravagance of humility, was a mere bald statement of facts. Since Anna, with a perversity that he entirely disapproved, refused to marry, and appeared to be possessed of the obstinacy that had always been a peculiarity of her German forefathers, and which was well enough in a man, but undesirable in a woman, whose calling it was to be gentle and yielding (*sanft und nachgiebig*), and convinced from what he had seen during his visit to London that she could never by any possibility be happy with her brother and sister-in-law, and moreover considering that it was beneath the dignity of his sister's daughter, a young lady of good family, for ever to roll herself in the feathers with which the middle-class goose-born Dobbs had furnished Peter's otherwise defective nest, he had decided to make her independent altogether of them, numerous though his own sons were, and angry as they no doubt would be, by bestowing on her absolutely after his death the only property he could leave to whomsoever he chose, a small estate near Stralsund, where he hoped to pass his last years. It was in a flourishing condition, easy to manage, bringing in a yearly average of forty thousand marks, and with an experienced inspector whom he earnestly recommended her to keep. He trusted his dear Anna would go

and live there, and keep it up to its present state of excellence, and would finally marry a good German gentleman, of whom there were many, and return in this way altogether to the country of her forefathers. The estate was not so far from Stralsund as to make it impossible for her to drive there when she wished to indulge any feminine desire she might have to trim herself (*sich putzen*), and he recommended her to begin a new life, settling there with some grave and sober female advanced in years as companion and protectress, until such time as she should, by marriage, pass into the care of that natural protector, her husband.

Then followed a short exposition of his views on women, especially those women who go to parties all their lives and talk *Klatsch*; a spirited comparing of such women with those whose interests keep them busy in their own homes; and a final exhortation to Anna to seize this opportunity of choosing the better life, which was always, he said, a life of simplicity, frugality, and hard work.

Anna wept and laughed together over this letter—the tenderest laughter and the happiest tears. It seemed by turns the wildest improbability that she should be well off, and the most natural thing in the world. Susie was out. Never had her absence been terrible before. Anna could hardly bear the waiting. She walked up and down the room, for sitting still was impossible, holding the precious letters tight in her little cold hands, her cheeks burning, her eyes sparkling, in an agony of impatience and anxiety lest something should have happened to delay Susie

at this supreme moment. At the window end of the room she stopped each time she reached it and looked eagerly up and down the street, the flower-women and the blessedness of selling daffodils having within an hour become profoundly indifferent to her. At the other end of the room, where a bureau stood, she came to a standstill too, and snatching up a pen began a letter to Peter in Devonshire; but, hearing wheels, threw it down and flew to the window again. It was not Susie's carriage, and she went back to the letter and wrote another line; then again to the window; then again to the letter; and it was the letter's turn as Susie, fagged from a round of calls, came in.

Susie's afternoon had not been a success. She had made advances to a woman of enviably high position with the intrepidity that characterised all her social movements, and she had been snubbed for her pains with more than usual rudeness. She had had, besides, several minor annoyances. And to come in worn out, and have your sister-in-law, who would hardly speak to you at luncheon, fall on your neck and begin violently to kiss you, is really a little hard on a woman who is already cross.

"Now what in the name of fortune is the matter now?" gasped Susie, breathlessly disengaging herself.

"Oh, Susie! oh, Susie!" cried Anna incoherently, "what ages you have been away—and the letters came directly you had gone—and I've been watching for you ever since, and was so dreadfully afraid something had happened–"

"But what are you talking about, Anna?" interrupted Susie

irritably. It was late, and she wanted to rest for a few minutes before dressing to go out again, and here was Anna in a new mood of a violent nature, and she was weary beyond measure of all Anna's moods.

"Oh, such a wonderful thing has happened!" cried Anna; "such a wonderful thing! What will Peter say? And how glad you will be–" And she thrust the letters with trembling fingers into Susie's unresponsive hand.

"What is it?" said Susie, looking at them bewildered.

"Oh, no—I forgot," said Anna, wildly as it seemed to Susie, pulling them out of her hand again. "You can't read German—see here–" And she began to unfold them and smooth out the creases she had made, her hands shaking visibly.

Susie stared. Clearly something extraordinary had happened, for the frosty Anna of the last few months had melted into a radiance of emotion that would only not be ridiculous if it turned out to be justified.

"Two German letters," said Anna, sitting down on the nearest chair, spreading them out on her lap, and talking as though she could hardly get the words out fast enough, "one from Uncle Joachim–"

"Uncle Joachim?" repeated Susie, a disagreeable and creepy doubt as to Anna's sanity coming over her. "You know very well he's dead and can't write letters," she said severely.

"—and one from his lawyer," Anna went on, regardless of everything but what she had to tell. "The lawyer's letter is full of

technical words, difficult to understand, but it is only to confirm what Uncle Joachim says, and his is quite plain. He wrote it some time before he died, and left it with his lawyer to send on to me."

Susie was listening now with all her ears. Lawyers, deceased uncles, and Anna's sparkling face could only have one meaning.

"Uncle Joachim was our mother's only brother–"

"I know, I know," interrupted Susie impatiently.

"—and was the dearest and kindest of uncles to me–"

"Never mind what he was," interrupted Susie still more impatiently. "What has he done for you? Tell me that. You always pretended, both of you—Peter too—that he had miles of sandy places somewhere in the desert, and dozens of boys. What could he do for you?"

"Do for me?" Anna rose up with a solemnity worthy of the great news about to be imparted, put both her hands on Susie's little shoulders, and looking down at her with shining eyes, said slowly, "He has left me an estate bringing in forty thousand marks a year."

"Forty thousand!" echoed Susie, completely awestruck.

"Marks," said Anna.

"Oh, marks," said Susie, chilled. "That's francs, isn't it? I really thought for a moment–"

"They're more than francs. It brings in, on an average, two thousand pounds a year. Two—thousand—pounds—a—year," repeated Anna, nodding her head at each word. "Now, Susie, what do you think of that?"

"What do I think of it? Why, that it isn't much. Where would you all have been, I wonder, if I had only had two thousand a year?"

"Oh, congratulate me!" cried Anna, opening her arms. "Kiss me, and tell me you are glad! Don't you see that I am off your hands at last? That we need never think about husbands again? That you will never have to buy me any more clothes, and never tire your poor little self out any more trotting me round? I don't know which of us is to be congratulated most," she added laughing, looking at Susie with her eyes full of tears. Then she insisted on kissing her again, and murmured foolish things in her ear about being so sorry for all her horrid ways, and so grateful to her, and so determined now to be good for ever and ever.

"My *dear* Anna," remonstrated Susie, who disliked sentiment and never knew how to respond to exhibitions of feeling. "Of course I congratulate you. It almost seems as if throwing away one's chances in the way you have done was the right thing to do, and is being rewarded. Don't let us waste time. You know we go out to dinner. What has he left Peter?"

"Peter?" said Anna wonderingly.

"Yes, Peter. He was his nephew, I suppose, just as much as you were his niece."

"Well, but Susie, Peter is different. He—he doesn't need money as I do; and of course Uncle Joachim knew that."

"Nonsense. He hasn't got a penny. Let me look at the letters."

"They're in German. You won't be able to read them."

"Give them to me. I learned German at school, and got a prize. You're not the only person in the world who can do things."

She took them out of Anna's hand, and began slowly and painfully to read the one from Uncle Joachim, determined to see whether there really was no mention of Peter. Anna looked on, hot and cold by turns with fright lest by some chance her early studies should not after all have been quite forgotten.

"Here's something about Peter—and me," Susie said suddenly. "At least, I suppose he means me. It is something Dobbs. Why does he call me that? It hasn't been my name for fifteen years."

"Oh, it's some silly German way. He says the *geborene* Dobbs, to distinguish you from other Lady Estcourts."

"But there are no others."

"Oh, well, his sister was one. Give me the letter, Susie—I can tell you what he says much more quickly than you can read it."

"'*Unter der Würde einer jünge Dame aus guter Familie*,'" read out Susie slowly, not heeding Anna, and with the most excruciating pronunciation that was ever heard, "'*sich ewig auf den Federn, mit welchen die bürgerliche Gans geborene Dobbs Peters sonst mangelhaftes Nest ausgestattet hat, zu wälzen*.' What stuff he writes. I can hardly understand it. Yet I must have been good at it at school, to get the prize. What is that bit about me and Peter?"

"Which bit?" said Anna, blushing scarlet. "Let me look." She got the letter back into her possession. "Oh, that's where he says

that—that he doesn't think it fair that I should be a burden for ever on you and Peter."

"Well, that's sensible enough. The old man had some sense in him after all, absurd though he was, and vulgar. It *isn't* fair, of course. I don't mean to say anything disagreeable, or throw all I have done for you in your face, but really, Anna, few mothers would have made the sacrifices I have for you, and as for sisters-in-law—well, I'd just like to see another."

"Dear Susie," said Anna tenderly, putting her arm round her, ready to acknowledge all, and more than all, the benefits she had received, "you have been only too kind and generous. I know that I owe you everything in the world, and just think how lovely it is for me to feel that now I can take my weight off your shoulders! You must come and live with *me* now, whenever you are sick of things, and I'll feel so proud, having you in my house!"

"Live with you?" exclaimed Susie, drawing herself away. "Where are you going to live?"

"Why, there, I suppose."

"Live there! Is that a condition?"

"No, but Uncle Joachim keeps on saying he hopes I will, and that I'll settle down and look after the place."

"Look after the place yourself? How silly!"

"Yes, you haven't taught me much about farming, have you? He wants me to turn quite into a German."

"Good gracious!" cried Susie, genuinely horrified.

"He seems to think that I ought to work, and not spend my

life talking *Klatsch*."

"Talking what?"

"It's what German women apparently talk when they get together. We don't. I'd never do anything with such an ugly name, and I'm positive you wouldn't."

"Where is this place?"

"Near Stralsund."

"And where on earth is that?"

"Ah," said Anna, investigating cobwebby corners of her memory, "that's what I should like to be able to remember. Perhaps," she added honestly, "I never knew. Let me call Letty, and ask her to bring her atlas."

"Letty won't know," said Susie impatiently, "she only knows the things she oughtn't to."

"Oh, she isn't as wise as all that," said Anna, ringing the bell. "Anyhow she has maps, which is more than we have."

A servant was sent to request Miss Letty Estcourt to attend in the drawing-room with her atlas.

"Whatever's in the wind now?" inquired Letty, open-mouthed, of her governess. "They're not going to examine me this time of night, are they, Leechy?" For she suffered greatly from having a brother who was always passing examinations and coming out top, and was consequently subjected herself, by an ambitious mother who was sure that she must be equally clever if she would only let herself go, to every examination that happened to be going for girls of her age; so that she and Miss Leech spent

their days either on the defensive, preparing for these unprovoked assaults, or in the state of collapse which followed the regularly recurring defeat, and both found their lives a burden too great to be borne.

There was a preliminary scuffle of washing and brushing, and then Letty marched into the drawing-room, her atlas under her arm and deep suspicion on her face. But no bland and treacherous examiner was visible, covering his preliminary movements with ghastly pleasantries; only her mother and her pretty aunt.

"Where's Stralsund?" they cried together, as she opened the door.

Letty stopped short and stared. "What's that?" she asked.

"It's a place—a place in Germany."

"Letty, do you mean to tell me that you don't know where Stralsund is?" asked Susie, in a voice that would have been of thunder if it had been big enough. "Do you mean to say that after all the money I have spent on your education you don't know *that*?"

Was this a new form of torture? Was she to find the examining spirit lurking even in the familiar and hitherto harmless forms of her mother and her aunt? She openly showed her disgust. "If it's a place, it's in this atlas," she said, "and if this is going to be an examination, I don't think it's fair; and if it's a game, I don't like it." And she threw her atlas unceremoniously on to the nearest chair; for though her mother could force her to do many things, she could never, somehow, force her to be respectful.

"What a horror the child has of lessons!" cried Susie. "Don't be so silly. We only want to see if you know where Stralsund is, that's all."

"Tell us where it is, Letty," said Anna coaxingly, kneeling down in front of the chair and opening the atlas. "Let us find the map of Germany and look for it. Why, you did Germany for your last exam.—you must have it all at your fingers' ends."

"It didn't stay there, then," said Letty moodily; but she went over to Anna, who was always kind to her, and began to turn over the well-thumbed pages.

Oh, what recollections lurked in those dirty corners! Surely it is hard on a person of fourteen, who is as fond of enjoying herself as anybody else, to be made to wrestle with maps upstairs in a dreary room, when the sun is shining, and the voices of the children passing come up joyously to the prison windows, and all the world is out of doors! Letty thought so, and Miss Leech thought it hard on a person of thirty, and each tried to console the other, but neither knew how, for their case seemed very hopeless. Did not unending vistas of classes and lectures stretch away before and behind them, dotted at intervals, oh, so frequent! with the black spots of examinations? Was not the pavement of Gower Street, and Kensington Square, and of all those districts where girls can be lectured into wisdom, quite worn by their patient feet? And then the accomplishments! Oh, what a life it was! A man came twice a week and insisted on teaching her to fiddle; a highly nervous man, who jerked her

elbow and rapped her knuckles with his bow whenever she played out of tune, which was all the time, and made bitter remarks of a killingly sarcastic nature to Miss Leech when she stumbled over the accompaniments. On Wednesdays there was a dancing class, where a pinched young lady played the piano with the energy of despair, and a hot and agile master with unduly turned-out toes taught the girls the Lancers, earning his bread in the sweat of his brow. He also was sarcastic, but he clothed his sarcasms in the garb of kindly fun, laughing gently at them himself, and expecting his pupils to laugh too; which they did uneasily, for the fun was of a personal nature, evoked by the clumsiness or stupidity of one or other of them, and none knew when her own turn might not come. The lesson ended with what he called the March of Grace round the room, each girl by herself, no music to drown the noise her shoes made on the bare boards, the others looking on, and the master making comments. This march was terrible to Letty. All her nightmares were connected with it. She was a podgy, dull-looking girl, fat and pale and awkward, and her mother made her wear cheap shoes that creaked. "Miss Estcourt has new shoes on again," the dancing master would say, gently smiling, when Letty was well on her way round the room, cut off from all human aid, conscious of every inch of her body, desperately trying to be graceful. And everybody tittered except the victim. "You know, Miss Estcourt," he would say at every second lesson, "there is a saying that creaking shoes have not been paid for. I beg your pardon? Did you say they had been paid

for? Miss Estcourt says she does not know." And he would turn to his other pupils with a shrug and a gentle smile.

On Saturday afternoons there were the Popular Concerts at St. James's Hall to be gone to—Susie regarded them as educational, and subscribed—and Letty, who always had chilblains on her feet in winter, suffered tortures trying not to rub them; for as surely as she moved one foot and began to rub the other with it, however gently, fierce enthusiasts in the row in front would turn on her—old gentlemen of an otherwise humane appearance, rapt ladies with eyeglasses and loose clothes—and sh-sh her with furious hissings into immobility. "Oh, Letty, *try* and sit still," Miss Leech, who dreaded publicity, would implore in a whisper; but who that has not had them can know the torture of chilblains inside thick boots, where they cannot be got at? As soon as the chilblains went, the Saturday concerts left off, and it seemed as though Fate had nothing better to do than to be spiteful.

It was indeed a dreadful thing, thought Letty, as she bent over the map of Germany, to be young and to have to be made clever at all costs. Here was her aunt even, her pretty, kind aunt, asking her geography questions at seven o'clock at night, when she thought that she had really done with lessons for one more day, and had been so much enjoying Leechy's description of the only man she ever loved, while she comfortably toasted cheese at the schoolroom fire. Anna, who spent such lofty hours of spiritual exaltation at St. Paul's, and came away with her soul melted into pity for the unhappy, and yearned with her whole being to help

them, never thought of Letty as a creature who might perhaps be helped to cheerfulness with a little trouble. Letty was too close at hand; and enthusiastic philanthropists, casting about for objects of charity, seldom see what is at their feet.

It was so difficult to find Stralsund that by the time Letty's wandering finger had paused upon it Susie could only give one glance of horror at its position, and hurry away with Anna to dress. Anna, too, would have preferred it to be farther south, in the Black Forest, or some other romantic region, where it would have amused her to go occasionally, at least, for a few weeks in the summer. But there it was, as far north as it could be, in a part of the world she had hardly heard of, except in connection with dogs.

It did not, however, matter where it was. Uncle Joachim had merely recommended and not enjoined. It would be rather extraordinary for her to go there and set up housekeeping alone. She need not go; she was almost sure she would not go. Anyhow there was no necessity to decide at once. The money was what she wanted, and she could spend it where she chose. Let Uncle Joachim's inspector, of whom he wrote in such praise, go on getting forty thousand marks a year out of the place, and she would be perfectly content.

She ran upstairs to put on her prettiest dress, and to have her hair done in the curls and waves she had so long eschewed. Should she not make herself as charming as possible for this charming world, where everybody was so good and kind, and

add her measure of beauty and kindness to the rest? She beamed on Letty as she passed her on the stairs, climbing slowly up with her big atlas, and took it from her and would carry it herself; she beamed on Miss Leech, who was watching for her pupil at the schoolroom door; she beamed on her maid, she beamed on her own reflection in the glass, which indeed at that moment was that of a very beautiful young woman. Oh happy, happy world! What should she do with so much money? She, who had never had a penny in her life, thought it an enormous, an inexhaustible sum. One thing was certain—it was all to be spent in doing good; she would help as many people with it as she possibly could, and never, never, never let them feel that they were under obligations. Did she not know, after fifteen years of dependence on Susie, what it was like to be under obligations? And what was more cruelly sad and crushing and deadening than dependence? She did not yet know what sort of people she would help, or in what way she would help, but oh, she was going to make heaps of people happy forever! While Hilton was curling her hair, she thought of slums; but remembered that they would bring her into contact with the clergy, and most of her offers of late had been from the clergy. Even the vicar who had prepared her for confirmation, his first wife being then alive, and a second having since been mourned, had wanted to marry her. "It's because I am twenty-five and staid that they think me suitable," she thought; but she could not help smiling at the face in the glass.

When she was dressed and ready to go down she was forced

to ask herself whether the person that she saw in the glass looked in the least like a person who would ever lead the simple, frugal, hard-working life that Uncle Joachim had called the better life, and in which he seemed to think she would alone find contentment. Certainly she knew him to be very wise. Well, nothing need be decided yet. Perhaps she would go—perhaps she would not. "It's this white dress that makes me look so—so unsuitable," she said to herself, "and Hilton's wonderful waves."

And she went downstairs trying not to sing, the sweetest of feminine creatures, happiness and love and kindness shining in her eyes, a lovely thing saved from the blight of empty years, and brought back to beauty, by Uncle Joachim's timely interference.

Letty and Miss Leech heard the singing, and stopped involuntarily in their conversation. It was a strange sound in that dull and joyless house.

"I don't know what's the matter, Leechy," Letty had said, on her return from the drawing-room, "but mamma and Aunt Anna are too weird to-night for anything. What do you think they had me down for? They didn't know where Stralsund was, and wanted to find out. They pretended they wanted to see if *I* knew, but I soon saw through that game. And Aunt Anna looks frightfully happy. I believe she's going to be married, and wants to go to Stralsund for the honeymoon."

And Letty took up her toasting fork, while Miss Leech, as in duty bound, refreshed her pupil's memory in regard to Stralsund and Wallenstein and the Hansa cities generally.

CHAPTER IV

Peter, meditating on the banks of the river at Estcourt, came to the conclusion that a journey to London would be made unnecessary by the equal efficacy of a congratulatory letter.

He had been greatly moved by the news of his sister's good fortune, and in the first flush of pleasure and sympathy had ordered his things to be packed in readiness for his departure by the night train. Then he had gone down to the river, and there, thinking the matter over quietly, amid the soothing influences of grey sky, grey water, and green grass, he gradually perceived that a letter would convey all that he felt quite well, perhaps better than any verbal expressions of joy, and as he would in any case only stay a few hours in town the long journey seemed hardly worth while. He sent a letter, therefore, that very evening—a kind, brotherly letter, in which, after heartily congratulating his dear little sister, he said that it would be necessary for her to go over to Germany, see the lawyer, and take possession of her property. When she had done that, and made all arrangements as to the future payment of the income derived from the estate, she would of course come back to them; for Estcourt was always to be her home, and now that she was independent she would no longer be obliged to be wherever Susie was, but would, he hoped, come to him, and they could go fishing together,—"and there's nothing to beat fishing," concluded Peter, "if you want peace."

But Anna did not want peace; at least, not that kind of peace just at that moment. Sitting in a punt was not what she wanted. She was thrilled by the love of her less fortunate fellow-creatures, and the sense of power to help them, and the longing to go and do it. What she really wanted of Peter was that he should take her to Germany and help her through the formalities; for before his letter arrived she too had seen that that was the first thing to be done.

Of this, however, he did not write a word. She thought he must have forgotten, so natural did it appear to her that her brother should go with her; and she wrote him a little note, asking when he would be able to get away. She received a long letter in reply, full of regrets, excuses, and good reasons, which she read wonderingly. Had she been selfish, or was Peter selfish? She thought it all out carefully, and found that it was she who had been selfish to expect Peter, always a hater of business and a lover of quiet, to go all that way and worry himself with tiresome money arrangements. Besides, perhaps he was not feeling well. She knew he suffered from rheumatism; and when you have rheumatism the mere thought of a long journey is appalling.

Susie, whose head was very clear on all matters concerning money, had also recognised the necessity of Anna's going to Germany, and had also regarded Peter as the most natural companion and guide; but she was not surprised when Anna told her that he could not go. "It was too much to expect," apologised Anna. "He often has rheumatism in the spring, and perhaps he

has it now."

Susie sniffed.

"The question is," said Anna after a pause, "what am I to do, helpless virgin, in spite of my years,—never able to do a thing for myself?"

"I'll go with you."

"You? But what about your engagements?"

"Oh, I'll throw them over, and take you. Letty can come too. It will do her German good. Herr Schumpf says he's ashamed of her."

Susie had various reasons for offering herself so amiably, one being certainly curiosity. But the chief one was that the same woman who had been so rude to her the day Anna's news came, had sent out invitations to all the world to her daughter's wedding after Easter, and had not sent one to Susie.

This was one of those trials that cannot be faced. If she, being in London at the time, carefully explained to her friends that she was ill that day, and did actually stay in bed and dose herself the days preceding and following, who would believe her? Not if she waved a doctor's certificate in their faces would they believe her. They would know that she had not been invited, and would rejoice. She felt that she could not bear it. An unavoidable business journey to the Continent was exactly what she wanted to help her out of this desperate situation. On her return she would be able to hear the wedding discussed and express her disappointment at having missed it with a serene brow and a quiet

mind.

It is doubtful whether she would have gone with Anna, however urgent Anna's need, if she had been included in those invitations. But Anna, who could not know the secret workings of her mind, once more remembered her former treatment of Susie, so kind and willing to do all she could, and hung her head with shame.

They left London a day or two before Easter, Letty and Miss Leech, both of them nearly ill with suppressed delight at the unexpected holiday, going with them. They had announced their coming to Uncle Joachim's lawyer, and asked him to make arrangements for their accommodation at Kleinwalde, Anna's new possession. Susie proposed to stay a day in Berlin, which would give Anna time to talk everything over with the lawyer, and would enable Letty to visit the museums. She had a hopeful idea that Letty would absorb German at every pore once she was in the country itself, and that being brought face to face with the statues of Goethe and Schiller on their native soil would kindle the sparks of interest in German literature that she supposed every well-taught child possessed, into the roaring flame of enthusiasm. She could not believe that Letty had no sparks. One of her children being so abnormally clever, it must be sheer obstinacy on the part of the other that prevented it from acquiring the knowledge offered daily in such unstinted quantities. She had no illusions in regard to Letty's person, and felt that as she would never be pretty it was of importance that she should at

least be cultured. She sat opposite her daughter in the train, and having nothing better to do during the long hours that they were jolting across North Germany, looked at her; and the more she looked the more unreasoningly angry she became that Peter's sister should be so pretty and Peter's daughter so plain. And then so fat! What a horrible thing to have to take a fat daughter about with you in society. Where did she get it from? She herself and Peter were the leanest of mortals. It must be that Letty ate too much, which was not only a disgusting practice but an expensive one, and should be put down at once with rigour. Susie had not had such an opportunity of thoroughly inspecting her child for years, and the result of this prolonged examination of her weak points was that she would not let any of the party have anything to eat at all, declaring that it was vulgar to eat in trains, expressing amazement that people should bring themselves to touch the horrid-looking food offered, and turning her back in impatient disgust on two stout German ladies who had got in at Oberhausen, and who were enjoying their lunch quite unmoved by her contempt—one eating a chicken from beginning to end without a fork, and the other taking repeated sips of an obviously satisfactory nature from a big wine bottle, which was used, in the intervals, as a support to her back.

By the time Berlin was reached, these ladies, having been properly fed all day, were very cheerful, whereas Susie's party was speechless from exhaustion; especially poor Miss Leech, who was never very strong, and so nearly fainted that Susie was

obliged to notice it, and expressed a conviction to Anna in a loud and peevish aside that Miss Leech was going to be a nuisance.

"It is strange," thought Anna, as she crept into bed, "how travelling brings out one's worst passions."

It is indeed strange; for it is certain that nothing equals the expectant enthusiasm and mutual esteem of the start except the cold dislike of the finish. Many are the friendships that have found an unforeseen and sudden end on a journey, and few are those that survive it. But if Horace Walpole and Grey fell out, if Byron and Leigh Hunt were obliged to part, if a host of other personages, endowed with every gift that makes companionship desirable, could not away with each other after a few weeks together abroad, is it to be wondered at that weaker vessels such as Susie and Anna, Letty and Miss Leech, should have found the short journey from London to Berlin sufficient to enable them to see one another's failings with a clearness of vision that was startling?

On the lawyer, a keen-eyed man with a conspicuously fine face, Anna made an entirely favourable impression. When he saw this gracious young lady, so simple and so friendly, and looked into her frank and charming eyes, he perfectly understood that old Joachim should have been bewitched. But after a little conversation, it appeared that she had no present intention of carrying out her uncle's wishes, but, setting them coolly aside, proposed to spend all the good German money she could extract from her property in that replete and bloated land, England.

This annoyed him; first because he hated England and then because his father had managed old Joachim's affairs before he himself had stepped into the paternal shoes, and the feeling of both father and son for the old man had been considerably warmer than is usual between lawyer and client. Still he could not believe, judging after the manner of men, that anything so pretty could also be unkind; and scrutinising Lady Estcourt, because she was unattractive and had a sharp little face and a restless little body, he was convinced that she it was who was the cause of this setting aside of a dead benefactor's wishes. Susie, for her part, patronised him because his collar turned down.

Whenever Letty thought afterwards of Berlin, she thought of it as a place where all the houses are museums, and where you drink so many cups of chocolate with whipped cream on the top that you see things double for the rest of the time.

Anna thought of it as a charming place, where delightful lawyers fill your purse with money.

Susie thought of it with satisfaction as the one place abroad where, by dint of sternest economy, walks from sight to sight in the rain, and promiscuous cakes instead of the more satisfactory but less cheap meals Letty called square, she had successfully defended herself from being, as she put it, fleeced.

To Miss Leech, it was merely a place where your feet get wet, and your clothes are spoilt.

Early the next morning they started for Kleinwalde.

CHAPTER V

Stralsund is an old town of gabled houses, ancient churches, and quaint, roughly paved streets, forming an island, and joined to the mainland by dikes. It looks its best in the early summer, when the green and marshy plains on whose edge it stands are strewn with kingcups, and the little white clouds hang over them almost motionless, and the cattle are out, and the larks sing, and the orange and red sails of the fishing-smacks on the narrow belt of sea that divides the town from the island of Rügen make brilliant points of contrasting colour between the blue of water and sky. There is a divine freshness and brightness about the surrounding stretches of coarse grass and common flowers at that blest season of the year. The air is full of the smell of the sea. The sun beats down fiercely on plain and city. The people come out of the rooms in which most of their life is spent, and stand in the doorways and remark on the heat. An occasional heavy cart bumps over the stones, heard in that sleepy place for several minutes before and after its passing. There is an honest, tarry, fishy smell everywhere; and the traveller of poetic temperament in search of the picturesque, and not too nice about his comforts, could not fail, visiting it for the first time in the month of June, to be wholly delighted that he had come.

But in winter, and especially in those doubly gloomy days at the end of winter, when spring ought to have shown some signs

of its approach and has not done so, those days of howling winds and driving rain and frequent belated snowstorms, this plain is merely a bleak expanse of dreariness, with a forlorn old town huddling in its farthest corner.

It was at its very bleakest and dreariest on the morning that Susie and her three companions travelled across it. "What a place!" exclaimed Susie, as mile after mile was traversed, and there was still the same succession of flat ploughed fields, marshes, and ploughed fields again, with a rare group of furiously swaying pine trees or of silver birches bent double before the wind. "What a part of the world to come and live in! That old uncle of yours was as cracked as he could be to think you'd ever stay here for good. And imagine spending even a single shilling buying land here. I wouldn't take a barrowful at a gift."

"Well, I am taking a great many barrowfuls," said Anna, "and I am sure Uncle Joachim was right to buy a place here—he was always right."

"Oh, of course, it's your duty now to praise him up. Perhaps it gets better farther on, but I don't see how anybody can squeeze two thousand a year out of a desert like this."

The prospect from the railway that day was certainly not attractive; but Anna told herself that any place would look dreary such weather, and was much too happy in the first flush of independence to be depressed by anything whatever. Had she not that very morning given the chambermaid at the Berlin hotel so bounteous a reward for services not rendered that the

woman herself had said it was too much? Thus making amends for those innumerable departures from hotels when Susie had escaped without giving anything at all. Had she not also asked, and readily obtained, permission of Susie at the station in Berlin to pay for the tickets of the whole party? And had it not been a delightful and warming feeling, buying those tickets for other people instead of having tickets bought by other people for herself? At Pasewalk, a little town half way between Berlin and Stralsund, where the train stopped ten minutes, she insisted on getting out, defying the sleet and the puddles, and went into the refreshment room, and bought eggs and rolls and cakes, —everything she could find that was least offensive. Also a guidebook to Stralsund, though she was not going to stop in Stralsund; also some postcards with views on them, though she never used postcards with views on them, and came back loaded with parcels, her face glowing with childish pleasure at spending money.

"My *dear* Anna," said Susie; but she was hungry, and ate a roll with perfect complacency, allowing Letty to do the same, although only two days had elapsed since she had so energetically lectured her on the grossness of eating in trains.

Susie was in a particularly amiable frame of mind, and in spite of the weather was looking forward to seeing the place Uncle Joachim had thought would be a fit home for his niece; and as she and Anna were sitting together at one end of the carriage, and Letty and Miss Leech were at the other, and there was no

one else in the compartment, she was neither upset by the too near contemplation of her daughter, nor by the aspect of other travellers lunching. Miss Leech, always mindful of her duties, was making the most of her five hours' journey by endeavouring, in a low voice, to clear away the haze that hung in her pupil's mind round the details of her last winter's German studies. "Don't you remember anything of Professor Smith's lectures, Letty?" she inquired. "Why, they were all about just this part of Germany, and it makes it so much more interesting if one knows what happened at the different places. Stralsund, you know, where we shall be presently, has had a most turbulent and interesting past."

"Has it?" said Letty. "Well, I can't help it, Leechy."

"No; but my dear, you should try to recollect something at least of what you heard at the lectures. Have you forgotten the paper you wrote about Wallenstein?"

"I remember I did a paper. Beastly hard it was, too."

"Oh, Letty, don't say beastly—it really isn't a ladylike word."

"Why, mamma's always saying it."

"Oh, well. Don't you know what Wallenstein said when he was besieging Stralsund and found it such a difficult task?"

"I suppose he said too that it was beastly hard."

"Oh, Letty—it was something about chains. Now do you remember?"

"Chains?" repeated Letty, looking bored. "Do *you* know, Leechy?"

"Yes, I still remember that, though I confess that I have

forgotten the greater part of what I heard."

"Then what do you ask me for, when you know I don't know? What did he say about chains?"

"He said that he'd take the city, if it were rivetted to heaven with chains of iron," said Miss Leech dramatically.

"What a goat."

"Oh, hush—don't say those horrible words. Where do you learn them? Not from me, certainly not from me," said Miss Leech, distressed. She had a profound horror of slang, and was bewildered by the way in which these weeds of rhetoric sprang up on all occasions in Letty's speech.

"Well, and was it?"

"Was it what, my dear?"

"Chained to heaven?"

"The city? Why, how can a city be chained to heaven, Letty?"

"Then what did he say it for?"

"He was using a metaphor."

"Oh," said Letty, who did not know what a metaphor was, but supposed it must be something used in sieges, and preferred not to inquire too closely.

"He was obliged to retire," said Miss Leech, "leaving enormous numbers of slain on the field."

"Poor beasts. I say, Leechy," she whispered, "don't let's bother about history now. Go on with Mr. Jessup. You'd got to where he called you Amy for the first time."

Mr. Jessup was the person already alluded to in these pages

as the only man Miss Leech had ever loved, and his history was of absorbing interest to Letty, who never tired of hearing his first appearance on Miss Leech's horizon described, with his subsequent advances before the stage of open courting was reached, the courting itself, and its melancholy end; for Mr. Jessup, a clergyman of the Church of England, with a vicarage all ready to receive his wife, had suddenly become a prey to new convictions, and had gone over to the Church of Rome; whereupon Miss Leech's father, also a clergyman of the Church of England, had talked a great deal about the Scarlet Woman of Babylon, and had shut the door in Mr. Jessup's face when next he called to explain. This had happened when Miss Leech was twenty. Now, at thirty, an orphan resigned to the world's buffets, she found a gentle consolation in repeating the story of her ill-starred engagement to her keenly interested friend and pupil; and the oftener she repeated it the less did it grieve her, till at last she came actually to enjoy the remembrance of it, pleased to have played the principal part even in a drama that was hissed off her little stage, glad to find a sympathetic listener, dwelling much and fondly on every incident of that short period of importance and glory.

It is doubtful whether she would ever have extracted the same amount of pleasure from Mr. Jessup had he remained fixed in the faith of his fathers and married her in due season. By his secession he had unconsciously become a sort of providence to Letty and herself, saving them from endless hours

of dulness, furnishing their lonely schoolroom life with romance and mystery; and if in Miss Leech's mind he gradually took on the sweet intangibility of a pleasant dream, he was the very pith and marrow of Letty's existence. She glowed and thrilled at the thought that perhaps she too would one day have a Mr. Jessup of her own, who would have convictions, and give up everything, herself included, for what he believed to be right.

As usual, they at once became absorbed in Mr. Jessup, forgetting in the contemplation of his excellencies everything else in the world, till they were roused to realities by their arrival at Stralsund; and Susie, thrusting books and bags and umbrellas into their passive hands, pushed them out of the carriage into the wet.

Hilton, the maid shared by Susie and Anna, had then to be found and urged to clamber down quickly on to the low platform, where she stood helplessly, the picture of injured superiority, hustled by the hurrying porters and passengers, out of whose way she scorned to move, while Anna went to look for the luggage and have it put into the cart that had been sent for it.

This cart was an ordinary farm cart, used for bringing in the hay in June, but also used for carrying out the manure in November; and on a sack of straw lying in the bottom it was expected that Hilton should sit. The farm boy who drove it, and who helped the porter to tie the trunks to its sides lest they should too violently bump against each other and Hilton on the way, said so; the coachman of the carriage waiting for the *Herrschaften* pointed with his whip first at Hilton and then at the cart, and said

so; the porter, who seemed to think it quite natural, said so; and everybody was waiting for Hilton to get in, who, when she had at length grasped the situation, went to Susie, who was looking frightened and pretending to be absorbed by the sky, and with a voice shaken by passion, and a face changing from white to red, announced her intention of only going in that cart as a corpse, when they might do with her as they pleased, but as a living body with breath in it, never.

Here was a difficulty. And idlers, whose curiosity was not extinguishable by wind and sleet, began to press round, and people who had come by the same train stopped on their way out to listen. The farm boy patted the sack and declared that it was clean straw, the coachman stood up on his box and swore that it was a new sack, the porter assured the Fräulein that it was as comfortable as a feather bed, and nobody seemed to understand that what she was being offered was an insult.

Susie was afraid of Hilton, who had been in the service of duchesses, and who held these duchesses over her mistress's head whenever her mistress wanted to do anything that was inconvenient to herself; quoting their sayings, pointing out how they would have acted in any given case, and always, it appeared, they had done exactly what Hilton desired. Susie's admiration for duchesses was slavish, and Hilton was treated with an indulgent liberality that was absurd compared to the stinginess displayed towards everyone else. Hilton was not more horrified than her mistress when she saw the farm cart, and understood that it was

for the luggage and the maid. It was impossible to take her with them in what the porter called the *herrschaftliche Wagen*, for it was a kind of victoria, and how to get their four selves into it was a sufficient puzzle. "What shall we do?" said Susie, in despair, to Anna.

"Do? Why, she'll have to go in it. Hilton, don't be a foolish person, and don't keep us here in the wet. This isn't England, and nobody thinks anything here of driving in farm carts. It is patriarchal simplicity, that's all. People are staring at you now because you are making such a fuss. Get in like a good soul, and let us start."

"Only as a corpse, m'm," reiterated Hilton with chattering teeth, "never as a living body."

"Nonsense," said Anna impatiently.

"What shall we do?" repeated Susie. "Poor Hilton—what barbarians they must be here."

"We must send her in a *Droschky*, then, if it isn't too far, and we can get one to go."

"A *Droschky* all that distance! It will be ruinous."

"Well, we can't stand here amusing these people for ever."

"Oh, I wish we had never come to this horrible place!" cried Susie, really made miserable by Hilton's rage.

But Anna did not stay to listen either to her laments or to Hilton's monotonous "Only as a corpse, m'lady," and was already arranging with an unwilling driver, who had no desire whatever to drive to Kleinwalde, but consented to do so on being promised

twenty marks, a rest and feed of oats for his horses, and any little addition in the shape of refreshment and extra money that might suggest itself to Anna's generosity.

"You know, Anna, you can't expect *me* to pay for the fly," said Susie uneasily, when the appeased Hilton had been put into it and was out of earshot. "That dreadful cart is your property, I suppose."

"Of course it is," said Anna, smiling, "and of course the fly is my affair. How magnificent I feel, disposing of carts and *Droschkies*. Now, will you please to get into my carriage? And do you observe the extreme respectfulness of my coachman?"

The coachman, a strange-looking, round-shouldered being, with a long grizzled beard, a dark-blue cloth cap on his head, and a body clothed in a fawn-coloured suit and gaiters, on which a great many tarnished silver buttons adorned with Uncle Joachim's coat of arms were fastened at short intervals, removed his cap while his new mistress and her party were entering the carriage, and did not put it on again till they were ready to start.

"Quite as though we were royalties," said Susie.

"But the rest of him isn't," replied Anna, who was greatly amused by the turn-out. "Do you like my horses, Susie? Or do you suspect them of having been ploughing all the morning? Oh, well," she added quickly, ashamed of laughing at any part of her dear uncle's gift, "I suppose one has to have heavily built horses in this part of the world, where the roads are probably frightfully bad."

"Their tails might be a little shorter," said Susie.

"They might," agreed Anna serenely.

With the aid of the porter, who knew all about Uncle Joachim's will and was deeply interested, they were at last somehow packed into the carriage, and away they rattled over the rough stones, threading the outskirts of the town on the mainland, the hail and wind in their faces, out into the open country, with their horses' heads turned towards the north. The fly containing Hilton followed more leisurely behind, and the farm cart containing the unused sack of straw followed the fly.

"We can't see much of Stralsund," said Anna, trying to peep round the hood at the old town across the lakes separating it from the mainland.

"It's a very historical town," observed Susie, who had happened to notice, as she idly turned over the pages of her Baedeker on the way down, that there was a long description of it with dates. "As of course you know," she added, turning sharply to her daughter.

"Rather," said Letty. "Wallenstein said he'd take it if it were chained to heaven, and when he found it wasn't he was frightfully sick, and went away and left them all in the fields."

Miss Leech, who was on the little seat, struggling to defend herself from the fury of the elements with an umbrella, looked anxious, but Susie only said in a gratified voice, "I'm glad you remember what you've been taught." To which Letty, who was in great spirits, and thought this drive in the wet huge fun, again

replied heartily, "Rather," and her mother congratulated herself on having done the right thing in bringing her to Germany, home of erudition and profundity, already evidently beginning to do its work.

The carriage smelt of fish, which presently upset Susie, who, unfortunately for her, had a nose that smelt everything. While they were in the town she thought the smell was in the streets, and bore it; but out in the open, where there was not a house to be seen, she found that it was in the carriage.

She fidgeted, and looked about, feeling with her foot under the opposite seat, expecting to find a basket somewhere, and determined if she found one to push it out quietly and say nothing; for that she should drive for two hours with her handkerchief up to her nose was more than anybody could expect of her. Already she had done more than anybody ought to expect of her, she reflected, in going to the expense of the journey and the inconvenience of the absence from home for Anna's sake, and she hoped that Anna felt grateful. She had never yet shrunk from her duty towards Anna, or indeed from her duty towards anyone, and she was sure she never would; but her duty certainly did not include the passive endurance of offensive smells.

"What are you looking for?" asked Anna.

"Why, the fish."

"Oh, do you smell it too?"

"Smell it? I should think I did. It's killing me."

"Oh, poor Susie!" laughed Anna, who was possessed by an

uncontrollable desire to laugh at everything. The conveyance (it could hardly be called a carriage) in which they were seated, and which she supposed was the one destined for her use if she lived at Kleinwalde, was unlike anything she had yet seen. It was very old, with enormous wheels, and bumped dreadfully, and the seat was so constructed that she was continually slipping forward and having to push herself back again. It was lined throughout, including the hood, with a white and black shepherd's plaid in large squares, the white squares mellowed by the stains of use and time to varying shades of brown and yellow; when Miss Leech's umbrella was blown aside by a gust of wind Anna could see her coachman's drab coat, with a little end of white tape that he had forgotten to tie, and whose uses she was unable to guess, fluttering gaily between its tails in the wind; on the left side of the box was a very big and gorgeous coat of arms in green and white, Uncle Joachim's colours; and whichever way she turned her head, there was the overpowering smell of fish. "We must be taking our dinner home with us," she said, "but I don't see it anywhere."

"There isn't anything under the seats. Perhaps the man has got it on the box. Ask him, Anna; I really can't stand it."

Anna did not quite know how to attract his attention. It seemed undignified to poke him, but she did not know his name, and the wind blew her voice back in the direction of Stralsund when she had cleared it, and coughed, and called out rather shyly, "Oh, *Kutscher! Kutscher!*"

Then she remembered that oh was not German, and that Uncle Joachim had used sonorous achs in its place, and she began again, "*Ach, Kutscher! Kutscher!*"

Letty giggled. "Go it, Aunt Anna," she said encouragingly, "dig him in the ribs with your umbrella—or I will, if you like."

Her mother, with her handkerchief to her nose, exhorted her not to be vulgar. Letty explained at some length that she was only being nice, and offering assistance.

"I really shall have to poke him," said Anna, her faint cries of *Kutscher* quite lost in the rattling of the carriage and the howling of the wind. "Or perhaps you would touch his arm, Miss Leech."

Miss Leech turned, and very gingerly touched his sleeve. He at once whistled to his horses, who stopped dead, snatched off his cap, and looking down at Anna inquired her commands.

It was done so quickly that Anna, whose conversational German was exceedingly rusty, was quite unable to remember the word for fish, and sat looking up at him helplessly, while she vainly searched her brains.

"What *is* fish in German?" she said, appealing to Susie, distressed that the man should be waiting capless in the rain.

"Letty, what's the word for fish?" inquired Susie sternly.

"Fish?" repeated Letty, looking stupid.

"Fish?" echoed Miss Leech, trying to help.

"*Fisch?*" said the coachman himself, catching at the word.

"Oh, yes; how utterly silly I am," cried Anna blushing and showing her dimples, "it's *Fisch*, of course. *Kutscher, wo ist*

Fisch?"

The man looked blank; then his face brightened, and pointing with his whip to the rolling sea on their right, visible across the flat intervening fields, he said that there was much fish in it, especially herrings.

"What does he say?" asked Susie from behind her handkerchief.

"He says there are herrings in the sea."

"Is the man a fool?"

Letty laughed uproariously. The coachman, seeing Letty and Anna laugh, thought he must have said the right thing after all, and looked very pleasant.

"*Aber im Wagen*," persisted Anna, "*wo ist Fisch im Wagen?*"

The coachman stared. Then he said vaguely, in a soothing voice, not in the least knowing what she meant, "*Nein, nein, gnädiges Fräulein*," and evidently hoped she would be satisfied.

"*Aber es riecht, es riecht!*" cried Anna, not satisfied at all, and lifting up her nose in unmistakeable displeasure.

His face brightened again. "*Ach so—jawohl, jawohl*," he exclaimed cheerfully; and hastened to explain that there were no fish nearer than the sea, but that the grease he had used that morning to make the leather of the hood and apron shine certainly had a fishy smell, as he himself had noticed. "The gracious Miss loves not the smell?" he inquired anxiously; for he had seven children, and was very desirous that his new mistress should be pleased.

Anna laughed and shook her head, and though she said with great emphasis that she did not love it at all, she looked so friendly that he felt reassured.

"What does he say?" asked Susie.

"Why, I'm afraid we shall have it all the way. It's the grease he's been rubbing the leather with."

"Barbarian!" cried Susie angrily, feeling sick already, and certain that she would be quite ill by the end of the drive. "And you laugh at him and encourage him, instead of taking up your position at once and showing him that you won't stand any nonsense. He ought to be—to be unboxed!" she added in great wrath; for she had heard of delinquent clergymen being unfrocked, and why should not delinquent coachmen be unboxed?

Anna laughed again. She tried not to, but she could not help it; and Susie, made still more angry by this childish behaviour, sulked during the rest of the drive.

"Go on—*avanti*!" said Anna, who knew hardly any Italian, and when she was in Italy and wanted her words never could find them, but had been troubled the last two days by the way in which these words came to her lips every time she opened them to speak German.

The coachman understood her, however, and they went on again along the straight high-road, that stretched away before them to a distant bend. The high-road, or *chaussée*, was planted on either side with maples, and between the maples big

whitewashed stones had been set to mark the way at night, and behind the rows of trees and stones, ditches had been dug parallel with the road as a protection to the crops in summer from the possible wanderings of erring carts. If a cart erred, it tumbled into the ditch. The arrangement was simple and efficacious. On the right, across some marshy land, they could see the sea for a little while, with the flat coast of Rügen opposite; and then some rising ground, bare of trees and brilliantly green with winter corn, hid it from view. On the left was the dreary plain, dotted at long intervals with farms and their little groups of trees, and here and there with windmills working furiously in the gale. The wind was icy, and the December snow still lay in drifts in the ditches. In that leaden landscape, made up of grey and brown and black, the patches of winter rye were quite startling in their greenness.

Susie thought it the most God-forsaken country she had ever seen, and expressed this opinion plainly on her face and in her attitudes without any need for opening her lips, shuddering back ostentatiously into her corner, wrapping herself with elaborate care in her furs, and behaving as slaves to duty sometimes do when the paths they have to tread are rough.

After driving along the *chaussée* for about an hour, they passed a big house standing among trees back from the road on the right, and a little farther on came to a small village. The carriage, pulled up with a jerk, and looking eagerly round the hood Anna found they had come to a standstill in front of a new red-brick building, whose steps were crowded with children.

Two or three men and some women were with the children. Two of the men appeared to be clergymen, and the elder, a middle-aged, mild-faced man, came down the steps, and bowing profoundly proceeded to welcome Anna solemnly, on behalf of those children from Kleinwalde who attended this school, to her new home. He concluded that Anna was the person to be welcomed because he could see nothing of the lady in the other corner but her eyes, and they looked anything but friendly; whereas the young lady on the left was leaning forward and smiling and holding out her hand.

He took it, and shook it slowly up and down, while he begged her to allow the hood of the carriage to be put back, so that the children from her village, who had walked three miles to welcome her, might be able to see her; and on Anna's readily agreeing to this, himself helped the coachman with his own white-gloved hands to put it down. Susie was therefore exposed to the full fury of the blast, and shrank still farther into her corner —an interesting and tantalising object to the school-children, a dark, mysterious combination of fur, cocks' feathers, and black eyebrows.

Then the clergyman, hat in hand, made a speech. He spoke distinctly, as one accustomed to speaking often and long, and Anna understood every word. She was wholly taken aback by these ceremonies, and had no idea of what she should say in reply, but sat smiling vaguely at him, looking very pretty and very shy. She soon found that her smiles were inappropriate, and they died

away; for, warming as he proceeded, the parson, it appeared, was taking it for granted that she intended to live on her property, and was eloquently descanting on the comfort she was going to be to the poor, assuring those present that she would be a mother to the sick, nursing them with her tender woman's hands, an angel of mercy to the hungry, feeding them in the hour of their distress, a friend and sister to the little children, succouring them, caring for them, pitiful of their weakness and their sins. His face lit up with enthusiasm as he went on, and Anna was thankful that Susie could not understand. This crowd of children, the women, the young parson, her coachman, were all hearing promises made on her behalf that she had no thought of fulfilling. She looked down, and twisted her fingers about nervously, and felt uncomfortable.

At the end of his speech, the parson, his eyes full of the tears drawn forth by his own eloquence, held up his hand and solemnly blessed her, rounding off his blessing with a loud Amen, after which there was an awkward pause. Susie heard the Amen, and guessed that something in the nature of a blessing was being invoked, and made a movement of impatience. The parson was odious in her eyes, first because he looked like the ministers of the Baptist chapels of her unmarried youth, but principally because he was keeping her there in the gale and prolonging the tortures she was enduring from the smell of fish. Anna did not know what to say after the Amen, and looked up more shyly than ever, and stammered in her confusion *Danke sehr*, hoping that it was a proper remark to make; whereupon the parson bowed

again, as one who should say Pray don't mention it. Then another man, evidently the schoolmaster, took out a tuning-fork, gave out a note, and the children sang a *chorale*, following it up with other more cheerful songs, in which the words *Frühling* and *Willkommen* were repeated a great many times, while the wind howled flattest contradiction.

When this was over, the parson begged leave to introduce the other clerical-looking person, a tall narrow youth, also in white kid gloves, buttoned up tightly in a long coat of broadcloth, with a pallid face and thick, upright flaxen hair.

"Herr Vicar Klutz," said the elder parson, with a wave of the hand; and the Herr Vicar, making his bow, and having his limp hand heartily grasped by that other little hand, and his furtive eyes smiled into by those other friendly eyes, became on the spot desperately enamoured; which was very natural, seeing that he had not spoken to a woman under forty for six months, and was himself twenty and a poet. He spent the rest of the afternoon shut up in his bedroom, where, refusing all nourishment, he composed a poem in which *berauschten Sinn* was made to rhyme with *Engländerin*, while the elder parson, in whose house he lived, thought he was writing his Good Friday sermon.

Then the schoolmaster was introduced, and then came the two women—the schoolmaster's wife and the parson's wife; and when Anna had smiled and murmured polite and incoherent little speeches to each in turn, and had nodded and bowed at least a dozen times to each of these ladies, who could by no

means have done with their curtseys, and had introduced them to the dumb figure in the corner, during which ceremonies Letty stared round-eyed and open-mouthed at the school-children, and the school-children stared round-eyed and open-mouthed at Letty, and Miss Leech looked demure, and Susie's brows were contracted by suffering, she wondered whether she might not now with propriety continue her journey, and if so whether it were expected that she should give the signal.

Everybody was smiling at everybody else by way of filling up this pause of hesitation, except Susie, who shut her eyes with great dignity, and shivered in so marked a manner that the parson himself came to the rescue, and bade the coachman help him put up the hood again, explaining to Anna as he did so that her *Frau Schwester* was not used to the climate.

Evidently the moment had come for going on, and the bows that had but just left off began again with renewed vigour. Anna was anxious to say something pleasant at the finish, so she asked the parson's wife, as she bade her good-bye, whether she and her husband would come to Kleinwalde the next day to dinner.

This invitation produced a very deep curtsey and a flush of gratification, but the recipient turned to her lord before accepting it, to inquire his pleasure.

"I fear not to-morrow, gracious Miss," said the parson, "for it is Good Friday."

"*Ach ja*," stammered Anna, ashamed of herself for having forgotten.

"*Ach ja*," exclaimed the parson's wife, still more ashamed of herself for having forgotten.

"Perhaps Saturday, then?" suggested Anna.

The parson murmured something about quiet hours preparatory to the Sabbath; but his wife, a person who struck Anna as being quite extraordinarily stout, was burning with curiosity to examine those foreign ladies more conveniently, and especially to see what manner of being would emerge from the pile of fur and feathers in the corner; and she urged him, in a rapid aside, to do for once without quiet hours. Whereupon he patted her on the cheek, smiled indulgently, and said he would make an exception and do himself the honour of appearing.

This being settled, Anna said *Gehen Sie* to her coachman, who again showed his intelligence by understanding her; and in a cloud of smiles and bows they drove away, the school-girls making curtseys, the schoolboys taking off their caps, and the parson standing hat in hand with his arm round his wife's waist as serenely as though it had been a summer's day and no one looking.

Anna became used to these displays of conjugal regard in public later on; but this first time she turned to Susie with a laugh, when the hood had hidden the group from view, and asked her if she had seen it. But Susie had seen nothing, for her eyes were shut, and she refused to answer any questions otherwise than by a feeble shake of the head.

On the other side of the village the *chaussée* came to an end,

and two deep, sandy roads took its place. There was a sign-post at their junction, one arm of which, pointing to the right-hand road that ran down close to the sea, had Kleinwalde scrawled on it; and beside this sign-post a man on a horse was waiting for them.

"Good gracious! More rot?" ejaculated Susie as the carriage stopped again, shaken out of the dignity of sulks by these repeated shocks.

"Oberinspector Dellwig," said the man, introducing himself, and sweeping off his hat and bowing lower and more obsequiously than anyone had yet done.

"This must be the inspector Uncle Joachim hoped I'd keep," said Anna in an undertone.

"I don't care who he is, but for heaven's sake don't let him make a speech. I can't stand this sort of thing any longer. You'll have me ill on your hands if you're not careful, and you won't like *that*, so you had better stop him."

"I can't stop him," said Anna, perplexed. She also had had enough of speeches.

"*Gestatten gnädiges Fräulein dass ich meine gehorsamste Ehrerbietung ausspreche*," began the glib inspector, bowing at every second word over his horse's ears.

There was no escape, and they had to hear him out. The man had prepared his speech, and say it he would. It was not so long as the parson's, but was quite as flowery in another way, overflowing with respectful allusions to the deceased master, and with expressions of unbounded loyalty, obedience, and devotion

to the new mistress.

Susie shut her eyes again when she found he was not to be stopped, and gave herself up for lost. What could Hilton, who must be close behind waiting in the cold, uncomforted by any food since leaving Berlin, think of all this? Susie dreaded the moment when she would have to face her.

The inspector finished all he had intended saying, and then, assuming a more colloquial tone, informed Anna that from the sign-post onward she would be driving through her own property, and asked permission to ride by her side the rest of the way. So they had his company for the last two miles and his conversation, of which there was much; for he had a ready tongue, and explained things to Anna in a very loud voice as they went along, expatiating on the magnificence of the crops the previous summer, and assuring her that the crops of the coming summer would be even more magnificent, for he had invented a combination of manures which would give such results that all Pomerania's breath would be taken away.

The road here was terrible, and the horses could hardly drag the carriage through the sand. It lurched and heaved from side to side, creaking and groaning alarmingly. Miss Leech was in imminent peril. Anna held on with both hands, and hardly had leisure to put in appropriate *achs* and *jas* and questions of a becoming intelligence when the inspector paused to take breath. She did not like his looks, and wished that she could follow Susie's example and avoid the necessity of seeing him by the

simple expedient of shutting her eyes. But somehow, she did not quite know how, responsibilities and obligations were suddenly pressing heavily upon her. These people had all made up their minds that she was going to be and do certain things; and though she assured herself that it did not in the least matter how they had made up their minds, yet she felt obliged to behave in the way that was expected of her. She did not want to talk to this unpleasant-looking man, and what he told her about the crops and their marvellousness was half unintelligible to her and wholly a bore. Yet she did talk to him, and looked friendly, and affected to understand and be deeply interested in all he said.

They passed through a plantation of young beeches, planted, Dellwig explained, by Uncle Joachim on his last visit; and after a few more yards of lurching in the sand came to some woods and got on to a fair road.

"The park," said Dellwig superbly, with a wave of the hand.

Susie opened her eyes at the word park, and looked about. "It isn't a park," she said peevishly, "it's a forest—a horrid, gloomy, damp wilderness."

"Oh, it's lovely!" cried Letty, giving a jump of delight as she peered down the serried ranks of pine trees.

It was a thick wood of pines and beeches, railed off from the road on either side by wooden rails painted in black and white stripes. Uncle Joachim had been the loyalest of Prussians, and his loyalty overflowed even into his fences. Æsthetic instincts he had none, and if he had been brought to see it, would not have

cared at all that the railings made the otherwise beautiful avenue look like the entrance to a restaurant or a railway station. The stripes, renewed every year, and of startling distinctness, were an outward and visible sign of his staunch devotion to the King of Prussia, the very lining of the carriage with its white and black squares was symbolic; and when they came to the gate within which the house itself stood, two Prussian eagles frowned down at them from the gate-posts.

CHAPTER VI

A low, white, two-storied house, separated from the forest only by a circular grass plot and a ditch with half-melted snow in it and muddy water, a house apparently quite by itself among the creaking pines, neither very old nor very new, with a great many windows, and a brown-tiled roof, was the home bestowed by Uncle Joachim on his dear and only niece Anna.

"So *this* is where I was to lead the better life?" she thought, as the carriage drew up at the door, and the moaning of the uneasy trees, and all the lonely sounds of a storm-beaten forest replaced the rattling of the wheels in her ears. "The better life, then, is a life of utter solitude, Uncle Joachim thought? I wish I knew —I wish I knew–" But what it was she wished she knew was hardly clear in her mind; and her thoughts were interrupted by a very untidy, surprised-looking maid-servant, capless, and in felt slippers, who had darted down the steps and was unfastening the leather apron and pulling out the rugs with hasty, agitated hands, and trying to pull Susie out as well.

The doorway was garlanded with evergreen wreaths, over which a green and white flag flapped; and curtseying and smiling beneath the wreaths stood Dellwig's wife, a short lady with smooth hair, weather-beaten face, and brown silk gloves, who would have been the stoutest person Anna had ever seen if she had not just come from the presence of the parson's wife.

"I never saw so many bows in my life," grumbled Susie, pushing the servant aside, and getting out cautiously, feeling very stiff and cold and miserable. "Letty, you are on my dress—oh, how d'you do—how d'you do," she murmured frostily, as the Frau Inspector seized her hand and began to talk German to her. "Anna, are you coming? This—er—person thinks I'm you, and is making me a speech."

Dellwig, who had sent his horse away in charge of a small boy, rapidly explained to his wife that the young lady now getting out of the carriage was their late master's niece, and that the other one must be the sister-in-law mentioned in the lawyer's letter; upon which Frau Dellwig let Susie go, and transferred her smiles and welcome to Anna. Susie went into the house to get out of the cold, only to find herself in a square hall whose iciness was the intolerable iciness of a place in which no sun had been allowed to shine and no windows had been opened for summers without number. When Uncle Joachim came down he lived in two rooms at the back of the house, with a door leading into the garden through which he went to the farm, and the hall had never been used, and the closed shutters never opened. There was no fireplace, or stove, or heating arrangement of any sort. Glass doors divided it from an inner and still more spacious hall, with a wide wooden staircase, and doors all round it. The walls in both halls were painted grass green; and from little chains in the ceiling stuffed hawks and eagles, shot by Uncle Joachim, and grown with years very dusty and moth-eaten, hung swinging in

the draught. The floor was boarded, and was still damp from a recent scrubbing. There was no carpet. A wooden bracket on the wall, with brass hooks, held a large assortment of whips and hunting crops; and in one corner stood an arrangement for coats, with Uncle Joachim's various waterproofs and head-coverings hanging monumentally on its pegs.

"Oh, how dreadful!" thought Susie, shivering more violently than ever. "And what a musty smell—it's damp, of course, and I shall be laid up. Poor Hilton! What will she think of this? Oh, how d'you do," she added aloud, as a female figure in a white apron suddenly emerged from the gloom and took her hand and kissed it; "Anna, who's this? Anna! Aren't you coming? Here's somebody kissing my hand."

"It's the cook," said Anna, coming into the inner hall with the others, Dellwig and his wife keeping one on either side of her, and both talking at once in their anxiety to make a good impression.

"The cook? Then tell her to give us some food. I shall die if I don't have something soon. Do you know what time it is? Past four. Can't you get rid of these people? And where's Hilton?"

Susie hardly seemed to see the Dellwigs, and talked to Anna while they were talking to her as though they did not exist. If Anna felt an obligation to be polite to these different persons she felt none at all. They did not understand English, but if they had it would not have mattered to her, and she would have gone on talking about them as though they had not been there.

Both the Dellwigs had very loud voices, so Susie had to raise hers in order to be heard, and there was consequently such a noise in the empty, echoing house, that after looking round bewildered, and trying to answer everybody at once, Anna gave it up, and stood and laughed.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Susie crossly, "we are all starving, and these people won't go."

"But how can I make them go?"

"They're your servants, I suppose. I should just say that I'd send for them when I wanted them."

"They'd be very much astonished. The man is so far from being my servant that I believe he means to be my master."

The two Dellwigs, perplexed by Anna's laughter when nobody had said anything amusing, and uneasy lest she should be laughing at something about themselves, looked from her to Susie suspiciously, and for that brief moment were quiet.

"*Wir sind hungrig*," said Anna to the wife.

"The food comes immediately," she replied; and hastened away with the cook and the other servant through a door evidently leading to the kitchen.

"*Und kalt*," continued Anna plaintively to the husband, who at once flung open another door, through which they saw a table spread for dinner. "*Bitte, bitte*," he said, ushering them in as though the place belonged to him.

"Does this person live in the house?" inquired Susie, eying him with little goodwill.

"He told me he lives at the farm. But of course he has always looked after everything here."

When they were all in the dining-room, driven in by Dellwig, as Susie remarked, like a flock of sheep by a shepherd determined to stand no nonsense, he helped them with officious politeness to take off their wraps, and then, bowing almost to the ground, asked permission to withdraw while the *Herrschaften* ate, a permission that was given with alacrity, Anna's face falling, however, upon his informing her that he would come round later on in order to lay his plans for the summer before her.

"What does he say?" asked Susie, as the door shut behind him.

"He's coming round again later on."

"That man's going to be a nuisance—you see if he isn't," said Susie with conviction.

"I believe he is," agreed Anna, going over to the white porcelain stove to warm her hands.

"He's the limpet, and you're going to be the rock. Don't let him fleece you too much."

"But limpets don't fleece rocks," said Anna.

"He wouldn't be able to fleece me, *I* know, if I could talk German as well as you do. But you'll be soft and weak and amiable, and he'll do as he likes with you."

"Soft, and weak, and amiable!" repeated Anna, smiling at Susie's adjectives, "why, I thought I was obstinate—you always said I was."

"So you are. But you won't be to that man. He'll get round

you."

"Uncle Joachim said he was excellent."

"Oh, I daresay he wasn't bad with a man over him who knew all about farming, but mark my words, *you* won't get two thousand a year out of the place."

Anna was silent. Susie was invariably shrewd and sensible, if inclined, Anna thought, to be over suspicious, in matters where money was concerned. Dellwig's face was not one to inspire confidence: and his way of shouting when he talked, and of talking incessantly, was already intolerable to her. She was not sure, either, that his wife was any more satisfactory. She too shouted, and Anna detested noise. The wife did not appear again, and had evidently gone home with her husband, for a great silence had fallen upon the house, broken only by the monotonous sighing of the forest, and the pattering of rain against the window.

The dining-room was a long narrow room, with one big window forming its west end looking out on to the grass plot, the ditch, and the gate-posts with the eagles on them. It was a study in chocolate—brown paper, brown carpet, brown rep curtains, brown cane chairs. There were two wooden sideboards painted brown facing each other down at the dark end, with a collection of miscellaneous articles on them: a vinegar cruet that had stood there for years, with remains of vinegar dried up at the bottom; mustard pots containing a dark and wicked mixture that had once been mustard; a broken hand-bell used at long-past dinners, to summon servants long since dead; an old wine

register with entries in it of a quarter of a century back; a mouldy bottle of Worcester sauce, still boasting on its label that it would impart a relish to viands otherwise dull; and some charming Dresden china fruit-dishes, adorned with cheerful shepherds and shepherdesses, incurable optimists, persistently pleased with themselves and their surroundings through all the days and nights of all the cold silent years that they had been smiling at each other in the dark. On the round dinner-table was a pot of lilies of the valley, enveloped in crinkly pink tissue paper tied round with pink satin ribbon, with ears of the paper drawn up between the flower-stalks to produce a pleasing contrast of pink and white.

"Well, it's warm enough here, isn't it?" said Susie, going round the room and examining these things with an interest far exceeding that called forth by the art treasures of Berlin.

"Rather," said Letty, answering for everybody, and rubbing her hands. She frolicked about the room, peeping into all the corners, opening the cupboards, trying the sofa, and behaving in so frisky a fashion that her mother, who seldom saw her at home, and knew her only as a naughty gloomy girl, turned once or twice from the interesting sideboards to stare at her inquiringly through her lorgnette.

The servant with the surprised eyebrows, who presently brought in the soup, had put on a pair of white cotton gloves for the ceremony of waiting, but still wore her felt slippers. She put the plates in a pile on the edge of the table, murmured something in German, and ran out again; nor did she come back till she

brought the next course, when she behaved in a precisely similar manner, and continued to do so throughout the meal; the diners, having no bell, being obliged to sit patiently during the intervals, until she thought that they might perhaps be ready for some more.

It was an odd meal, and began with cold chocolate soup with frothy white things that tasted of vanilla floating about in it. Susie was so much interested in this soup that she forgot all about Hilton, who had been driven ignominiously to the back door and was left sitting in the kitchen till the two servants should have time to take her upstairs, and was employing the time composing a speech of a spirited nature in which she intended giving her mistress notice the moment she saw her again.

Her mistress meanwhile was meditatively turning over the vanilla balls in her soup. "Well, I don't like it," she said at last, laying down her spoon.

"Oh, it's ripping!" cried her daughter ecstatically. "It's like having one's pudding at the other end."

"How can you look at chocolate after Berlin, greedy girl?" asked her mother, disgusted by her child's obvious tendency towards a too free indulgence in the pleasures of the table. But Letty was feeling so jovial that in the face of this question she boldly asked for more—a request that was refused indignantly and at once.

There was such a long pause after the soup that in their hunger they began to eat the stewed apples and bottled cherries that were on the table. The brown bread, arranged in thin slices on

a white crochet mat in a japanned dish, felt so damp and was so full of caraway seeds that it was uneatable. After a while some roach, caught on the estate, and with a strong muddy flavour and bewildering multitudes of bones, was brought in; and after that came cutlets from Anna's pigs; and after that a queer red gelatinous pudding that tasted of physic; and after that, the meal being evidently at an end, Susie, who was very hungry, remarked that if all the food were going to be like those specimens they had better return at once to England, or they would certainly be starved. "It's a good thing you are not going to stay here, Anna," she said, "for you'd have to make a tremendous fuss before you'd get them to leave off treating you like a pig. Look here—teaspoons to eat the pudding with, and the same fork all the way through. It's a beastly hole"—Letty's eyebrows telegraphed triumphantly across to Miss Leech, "Well, did you hear that?"—"and we ought to have stayed in Berlin. There was nothing to be gained at all by coming here."

"Perhaps the dinner to-night will be better," said Anna, trying to comfort her, and little knowing that they had just eaten the dinner; but people who are hungry are surprisingly impervious to the influence of fair words. "It couldn't be worse, anyhow, so it really will probably be better. I'm very glad though that we did come, for I like it."

"Oh, yes, so do I, Aunt Anna!" cried Letty. "It's frightfully nice. It's like a picnic that doesn't leave off. When are we going over the house, and out into the garden? I do so want to go—oh,

I do so want to go!" And she jumped up and down impatiently on her chair, till her ardour was partially quenched by her mother's forbidding her to go out of doors in the rain. "Well, let's go over the house, then," said Letty, dying to explore.

"Oh, yes, you may go over the house," said her mother with a shrug of displeasure; though why she should be displeased it would have puzzled anyone who had dined satisfactorily to explain. Then she suddenly remembered Hilton, and with an exclamation started off in search of her.

The others put on their furs before going into the Arctic atmosphere of the hall, and began to explore, spending the next hour very pleasantly rambling all over the house, while Susie, who had found Hilton, remained shut up in the bedroom allotted her till supper time.

The cook showed Anna her bedroom, and when she had gone, Anna gave one look round at the evergreen wreaths with which it was decorated and which filled it with a pungent, baked smell, and then ran out to see what her house was like. Her heart was full of pride and happiness as she wandered about the rooms and passages. The magic word *mine* rang in her ears, and gave each piece of furniture a charm so ridiculously great that she would not have told any one of it for the world. She took up the different irrelevant ornaments that were scattered through the rooms, collected as such things do collect, nobody knew when or why, and she put them down again somewhere else, only because she had the right to alter things and she loved to remind herself of

it. She patted the walls and the tables as she passed; she smoothed down the folds of the curtains with tender touches; she went up to every separate looking-glass and stood in front of it a moment, so that there should be none that had not reflected the image of its mistress. She was so childishly delighted with her scanty possessions that she was thankful Susie remained invisible and did not come out and scoff.

What if it seemed an odd, bare place to eyes used to the superfluity of hangings and stuffings that prevailed at Estcourt? These bare boards, these shabby little mats by the side of the beds, the worn foxes' skins before the writing-tables, the cane or wooden chairs, the white calico curtains with meek cotton fringes, the queer little prints on the walls, the painted wooden bedsteads, seemed to her in their very poorness and unpretentiousness to be emblematical of all the virtues. As she lingered in the quiet rooms, while Letty raced along the passages, Anna said to herself that this Spartan simplicity, this absence of every luxury that could still further soften an already languid and effeminate soul, was beautiful. Here, as in the whitewashed praying-places of the Puritans, if there were any beauty and any glory it must all come from within, be all of the spirit, be only the beauty of a clean life and the glory of kind thoughts. She pictured herself waking up in one of those unadorned beds with the morning sun shining on her face, and rising to go her daily round of usefulness in her quiet house, where there would be no quarrels, and no pitiful ambitions, and none of those many

bitter heartaches that need never be. Would they not be happy days, those days of simple duties? "The better life—the better life," she repeated musingly, standing in the middle of the big room through whose tall windows she could see the garden, and a strip of marshy land, and then the grey sea and the white of the gulls and the dark line of the Rügen coast over which the dusk was gathering; and she counted on her fingers mechanically, "Simplicity, frugality, hard work. Uncle Joachim said *that* was the better life, and he was wise—oh, he was very wise—but still– And he loved me, and understood me, but still–"

Looking up she caught sight of herself in a long glass opposite, a slim figure in a fur cloak, with bare head and pensive eyes, lost in reflection. It reminded her of the day the letter came, when she stood before the glass in her London bedroom dressed for dinner, with that same sentence of his persistently in her ears, and how she had not been able to imagine herself leading the life it described. Now, in her travelling dress, pale and tired and subdued after the long journey, shorn of every grace of clothes and curls, she criticised her own fatuity in having held herself to be of too fine a clay, too delicate, too fragile, for a life that might be rough. "Oh, vain and foolish one!" she said aloud, apostrophising the figure in the glass with the familiar *Du* of the days before her mother died, "Art thou then so much better than others, that thou must for ever be only ornamental and an expense? Canst thou not live, except in luxury? Or walk, except on carpets? Or eat, except thy soup be not of chocolate? Go to

the ants, thou sluggard; consider their ways, and be wise." And she wrapped herself in her cloak, and frowned defiance at that other girl.

She was standing scowling at herself with great disapproval when the housemaid, who had been searching for her everywhere, came to tell her that the Herr Oberinspector was downstairs, and had sent up to know if his visit were convenient.

It was not at all convenient; and Anna thought that he might have spared her this first evening at least. But she supposed that she must go down to him, feeling somehow unequal to sending so authoritative a person away.

She found him standing in the inner hall with a portfolio under his arm. He was blowing his nose, making a sound like the blast of a trumpet, and waking the echoes. Not even that could he do quietly, she thought, her new sense of proprietorship oddly irritated by a nose being blown so aggressively in her house. Besides, they were her echoes that he was disturbing. She smiled at her own childishness.

She greeted him kindly, however, in response to his elaborate obeisances, and shook hands on seeing that he expected to be shaken hands with, though she had done so twice already that afternoon; and then she let herself be ushered by him into the drawing-room, a room on the garden side of the house, with French windows, and bookshelves, and a huge round polished table in the middle.

It had been one of the two rooms used by Uncle Joachim, and

was full of traces of his visits. She sat down at a big writing-table with a green cloth top, her feet plunged in the long matted hairs of a grey rug, and requested Dellwig to sit down near her, which he did, saying apologetically, "I will be so free."

The servant, Marie, brought in a lamp with a green shade, shut the shutters, and went out again on tiptoe; and Anna settled herself to listen with what patience she could to the loud voice that jarred so on her nerves, fortifying herself with reminders that it was her duty, and really taking pains to understand him. Nor did she say a word, as she had done to the lawyer, that might lead him to suppose she did not intend living there.

But Dellwig's ceaseless flow of talk soon wearied her to such an extent that she found steady attention impossible. To understand the mere words was in itself an effort, and she had not yet learned the German for rye and oats and the rest, and it was of these that he chiefly talked. What was the use of explaining to her in what way he had ploughed and manured and sown certain fields, how they lay, how big they were, and what their soil was, when she had not seen them? Did he imagine that she could keep all these figures and details in her head? "I know nothing of farming," she said at last, "and shall understand your plans better when I have seen the estate."

"*Natürlich, natürlich*," shouted Dellwig, his voice in strangest contrast to hers, which was particularly sweet and gentle. "Here I have a map—does the gracious Miss permit that I show it?"

The gracious Miss inclined her tired head, and he unrolled it

and spread it out on the table, pointing with his fat forefinger as he explained the boundaries, and the divisions into forest, pasture, and arable.

"It seems to be nearly all forest," said Anna.

"Forest! The forest covers two-thirds of the estate. It is the only forest on the entire promontory. Such care as I have bestowed on the forest has seldom been seen. It is *grossartig —colossal*!" And he lifted his hands the better to express his admiration, and was about to go into lengthy raptures when the map rolled itself up again with loud cracklings, and cut him short. He spread it out once more, and securing its corners began to describe the effects of the various sorts of artificial manure on the different crops, his cleverness in combining them, and his latest triumphant discovery of the superlative mixture that was to strike all Pomerania with awe.

"*Ja*," said Anna, balancing a paper-knife on one finger, and profoundly bored. "Whose land is that next to mine?" she asked, pointing.

"The land on the north and west belongs to peasants," said Dellwig. "On the east is the sea. On the south it is all Lohm. The gracious one passed through the village of Lohm this afternoon."

"The village where the school is?"

"Quite correct. The pastor, Herr Manske, a worthy man, but, like all pastors, taking ells when he is offered inches, serves both that church and the little one in Kleinwalde village, of which the gracious Miss is patroness. Herr von Lohm, who lives in the

house standing back from the road, and perhaps noticed by the gracious Miss, is Amtsvorsteher in both villages."

"What is Amtsvorsteher?" asked Anna, languidly. She was leaning back in her chair, idly balancing the paper-knife, and listening with half an ear only to Dellwig, throwing in questions every now and then when she thought she ought to say something. She did not look at him, preferring much to look at the paper-knife, and he could examine her face at his ease in the shadow of the lamp-shade, her dark eyelashes lowered, her profile only turned to him, with its delicate line of brow and nose, and the soft and gracious curves of the mouth and chin and throat. One hand lay on the table in the circle of light, a slender, beautiful hand, full of character and energy, and the other hung listlessly over the arm of the chair. Anna was very tired, and showed it in every line of her attitude; but Dellwig was not tired at all, was used to talking, enjoyed at all times the sound of his voice, and on this occasion felt it to be his duty to make things clear. So he went into the lengthiest details as to the nature and office of Amtsvorstehers, details that were perfectly incomprehensible and wholly indifferent to Anna, and spared neither himself nor her. While he talked, however, he was criticising her, comparing the laziness of her attitude with the brisk and respectful alertness of other women when he talked. He knew that these other women belonged to a different class; his wife, the parson's wife, the wives of the inspectors on other estates, these were not, of course, in the same sphere as the new

mistress of Kleinwalde; but she was only a woman, and dress up a woman as you will, call her by what name you will, she is nothing but a woman, born to help and serve, never by any possibility even equal to a clever man like himself. Old Joachim might have lounged as he chose, and put his feet on the table if it had seemed good to him, and Dellwig would have accepted it with unquestioning respect as an eccentricity of *Herrschaften*; but a woman had no sort of right, he said to himself, while he so fluently discoursed, to let herself go in the presence of her natural superior. Unfortunately, old Joachim, so level-headed an old gentleman in all other respects, had placed the power over his fortunes in the hands of this weak female leaning back so unbecomingly in her chair, playing with the objects on the table, never raising her eyes to his, and showing indeed, incredible as it seemed, every symptom of thinking of something else. The women of his acquaintance were, he was certain, worth individually fifty such affected, indifferent young ladies. They worked early and late to make their husbands comfortable; they were well practised in every art required of women living in the country; they were models of thrift and diligence; yet, with all their virtues and all their accomplishments, they never dreamed of lounging or not listening when a man was speaking, but sat attentively on the edge of their chairs, straight in the back and seemly, and when he had finished said *Jawohl*.

Anna certainly did sit very much at her ease, and instead of attending, as she ought to have done, to his description of

Amtsvorstehers, was thinking of other things. Dellwig had thick lips that could not be hidden entirely by his grizzled moustache and beard, and he had the sort of eyes known to the inelegant but truthful as fishy, and a big obstinate nose, and a narrow obstinate forehead, and a long body and short legs; and though all this, Anna told herself, was not in the least his fault and should not in any way prejudice her against him, she felt that she was justified in wishing that his manners were less offensive, less boastful and boisterous, and that he did not bite his nails. "I wonder," she thought, her eyes carefully fixed on the paper-knife, but conscious of his every look and movement, "I wonder if he is as artful as he looks. Surely Uncle Joachim must have known what he was like, and would never have told me to keep him if he had not been honest. Perhaps he is perfectly honest, and when I meet him in heaven how ashamed I shall be of myself for having had doubts!" And then she fell to musing on what sort of an appearance a chastened and angelic Dellwig would probably present, and looked up suddenly at him with new interest.

"I trust I have made myself comprehensible?" he was asking, having just come to the end of what he felt was a masterly *résumé* of Herr von Lohm's duties.

"I beg your pardon?" said Anna, bringing her thoughts back with difficulty from the consideration of nimbuses, "Oh, about Amtsvorstehers—no," she said, shaking her head, "you have not. But that is my fault. I can't understand everything at once. I shall do better later on."

"*Natürlich, natürlich*," Dellwig vehemently assured her, while he made inward comments on the innate incapacity of all *Weiber*, as he called them, to grasp the simplest fact connected with law and justice.

"Tell me about the livestock," said Anna, remembering Uncle Joachim's frequent and affectionate allusions to his swine. "Are there many pigs?"

"Pigs?" repeated Dellwig, lifting up his hands as though mere words were insufficient to express his feelings, "such pigs as the gracious Miss now possesses are nowhere else to be found in Pomerania. They are the pride, and at the same time the envy, of the whole province. 'Let my sausages,' said the Herr Landrath last winter, when the time for killing drew near, 'let my sausages consist solely of the pigs reared at Kleinwalde by my friend the Oberinspector Dellwig.' The Frau Landräthin was deeply injured, for she too breeds and fattens pigs, but not like ours—not like ours."

"Who is the Herr Landrath?" asked Anna absently; but immediately remembering the description of the Amtsvorsteher she added quickly, "Never mind—don't explain. I suppose he is some sort of an official, and I shall not be quite clear about these different officials till I have lived here some time."

"*Natürlich, natürlich*," agreed Dellwig; and leaving the Landrath unexplained he launched forth into a dissertation on Anna's pigs, whose excellencies, it appeared, were wholly due to the unrivalled skill he had for years displayed in their treatment.

"I have no children," he said, with a resigned and pious upward glance, "and my wife's maternal instincts find their satisfaction in tending and fattening these fine animals. She cannot listen to their cries the day they are killed, and withdraws into the cellar, where she prepares the stuffing. The gracious Miss ate the cutlets of one this very day. It was killed on purpose."

"Was it? I wish it hadn't been," said Anna, frowning at the remembrance of that meal. "I—I don't want things killed on my account. I—don't like pig."

"Not like pig?" echoed Dellwig, dropping his lower jaw in his amazement. "Did I understand aright that the gracious one does not eat pig's flesh gladly? And my wife and I who thought to prepare a joy for her!" He clasped his hands together and stared at her in dismay. Indeed, he was so much overcome by this extraordinary and wilful spurning of nature's best gifts that for a moment he was silent, and knew not how he should proceed. Were there not concentrated in the body of a single pig a greater diversity of joys than in any other form of pleasure that he could call to mind? Did it not include, besides the profounder delights of its roasted ribs, such solid satisfactions as hams, sausages, and bacon? Did not its liver, discreetly manipulated, rival the livers of Strasburg geese in delicacy? Were not its brains a source of mutual congratulation to an entire family at supper? Did not its very snout, boiled with peas, make an otherwise inferior soup delicious? The ribs of this particular pig were reposing at that moment in a cool place, carefully shielded from harm by his wife,

reserved for the Easter Sunday dinner of their new mistress, who, having begun at her first meal with the lesser joys of cutlets, was to be fed with different parts in the order of their excellence till the climax of rejoicing was reached on Easter Day in the dish of *Schweinebraten*, and who was now declaring, in a die-away, affected sort of voice, that she did not want to eat pig at all. Where, then, was her vulnerable point? How would he ever be able to touch her, to influence her, if she was indifferent to the chief means of happiness known to the dwellers in those parts? That was the real aim and end of his labours, of the labours, as far as he could see, of everyone else—to make as much money as possible in order to live as well as possible; and what did living well mean if it did not mean the best food? And what was the best food if not pig? Not to be killed on her account! On whose account, then, could they be killed? With an owner always about the place, and refusing to have pigs killed, how would he and his wife be able to indulge, with satisfactory frequency, in their favourite food, or offer it to their expectant friends on Sundays? He mourned old Joachim, who so seldom came down, and when he did ate his share of pork like a man, more sincerely at that moment than he would have thought possible. "*Mein seliger Herr*," he burst out brokenly, completely upset by the difference between uncle and niece, "*mein seliger Herr*——" And then, unable to go on, fell to blowing his nose with violence, for there were real tears in his eyes.

Anna looked up, surprised. She thought he had been speaking

of pigs, and here he was on a sudden bewailing his late master. When she saw the tears she was deeply touched. "Poor man," she said to herself, "how unjust I have been. Of course he loved dear Uncle Joachim; and my coming here, an utter stranger, taking possession of everything, must be very dreadful for him." She got up, at once anxious, as she always was, to comfort and soothe anyone who was sad, and put her hand gently on his arm. "I loved him too," she said softly, "and you who knew him so long must feel his death dreadfully. We will try and keep everything just as he would have liked it, won't we? You know what his wishes were, and must help me to carry them out. You cannot have loved him more than I did—dear Uncle Joachim!"

She felt very near tears herself, and condoned the sonorous nose-blowing as the expression of an honourable emotion.

And Dellwig, when he presently reached his home and was met at the door by his wife's eager "Well, how was she?" laconically replied "Mad."

CHAPTER VII

When Anna woke next morning she had a confused idea that something annoying had happened the evening before, but she had slept so heavily that she could not at once recollect what it was. Then, the sun on her face waking her up more thoroughly, she remembered that Susie had stayed upstairs with Hilton till supper time, had then come down, glanced with unutterable disgust at the raw ham, cold sausage, eggs, and tepid coffee of which the evening meal was composed, refused to eat, refused to speak, refused utterly to smile, and afterwards in the drawing-room had announced her fixed intention of returning to England the next day.

Anna had protested and argued in vain; nothing could shake this sudden determination. To all her expostulations and entreaties Susie replied that she had never yet dwelt among savages and she was not going to begin now; so Anna was forced to conclude that Hilton had been making a scene, and knowing the effect of Hilton's scenes she gave up attempting to persuade, but told her with outward firmness and inward quakings that she herself could not possibly go too.

Susie had been very angry at this, and still more angry at the reason Anna gave, which was that, having invited the parson and his wife to dinner on Saturday, she could not break her engagement. Susie told her that as she would never see either of

them again—for surely she would never again want to come to this place?—it was absurd to care twopence what they thought of her. What on earth did it matter if two inhabitants of the desert were offended or not offended once she was on the other side of the sea? And what did it matter at all how she treated them? She heaped such epithets as absurd, stupid, and idiotic on Anna's head, but Anna was not to be moved. She threatened to take Miss Leech and Letty away with her, and leave Anna a prey to the criticisms of Mrs. Grundy, and Anna said she could not prevent her doing so if she chose. Susie became more and more excited, more and more Dobbs, goaded by the recollection of what she had gone through with Hilton, and Anna, as usual under such circumstances, grew very silent. Letty sat listening in an agony of fright lest this cup of new experiences were about to be dashed prematurely from her eager lips; and Miss Leech discreetly left the room, though not in the least knowing where to go, finally seeking to drive away the nervous fears that assailed her in her lonely, creaking bedroom, where rats were gnawing at the woodwork, by thinking hard of Mr. Jessup, who on this occasion proved to be but a broken reed, pitted against the stern reality of rats.

The end of it, after Susie had poured out the customary reproaches of gross ingratitude and forgetfulness of all she had done for Anna for fifteen long years, was that Miss Leech and Letty were to stay on as originally intended, and come home with Anna towards the end of the holidays, and Susie would leave with

Hilton the very next day.

Anna's attempt to make it up when she said good-night was repulsed with energy. Anna was for ever doing aggravating things, and then wanting to make it up; but makings up without having given in an inch seemed to Susie singularly unsatisfactory ceremonies. Oh, these Estcourts and their obstinacy! She marched off to bed in high indignation, an indignation not by any means allowed to cool by Hilton during the process of undressing; and Anna, worn out, fell asleep the moment she lay down, and woke up, as she had pictured herself doing in that odd wooden bed, with the morning sun shining full on her face.

It was a bright and lovely day, and on the side of the house where she slept she could not hear the wind, which was still blowing from the north-west. She opened one of her three big windows and let the cold air rush into her room, where the curious perfume of the baked evergreen wreaths festooned round the walls and looking-glass and dressing-table, joined to the heat from the stove, produced a heavy atmosphere that made her gasp. Somebody must already have been in her room, for the stove had been lit again, and she could see the peat blazing inside its open door. But outside, what a divine coldness and purity! She leaned out, drinking it in in long breaths, the warm March sun shining on her head. The garden, a mere uncared-for piece of rough grass with big trees, was radiant with rain-drops; the strip of sea was a deep blue now, with crests of foam; the island coast opposite was a shadowy streak stretched across the feet

of the sun. Oh, it was beautiful to stand at that open window in the freshness, listening to the robin on the bare lilac bush a few yards away, to the quarrelling of the impudent sparrows on the path below, to the wind in the branches of the trees, to all the happy morning sounds of nature. A joyous feeling took possession of her heart, a sudden overpowering delight in what are called common things—mere earth, sky, sun, and wind. How lovely life was on such a morning, in such a clean, rain-washed, wind-scoured world. The wet smell of the garden came up to her, a whiff of marshy smell from the water, a long breath from the pines in the forest on the other side of the house. How had she ever breathed at Estcourt? How had she escaped suffocation without this life-giving smell of sea and forest? She looked down with delight at the wildness of the garden; after the trim Estcourt lawns, what a relief this was. This was all liberty, freedom from conventionality, absolute privacy; that was an everlasting clipping, and trimming, and raking, a perpetual stumbling upon gardeners at every step, for Susie would not be outdone by her greater neighbours in these matters. What was Hill Street looking like this fine March morning? All the blinds down, all the people in bed—how far away, how shadowy it was; a street inhabited by sleepy ghosts, with phantom milkmen rattling spectral cans beneath their windows. What a dream that life lived up to three days ago seemed in this morning light of reality. White clouds, like the clouds in Raphael's backgrounds, were floating so high overhead that they could not be hurried

by the wind; a black cat sat in a patch of sunshine on the path washing itself; somebody opened a lower window, and there was a noise of sweeping, presently made indistinguishable by the chorale sung by the sweeper, no doubt Marie, in a pious, Good Friday mood. "*Lob Gott ihr Christen allzugleich*," chanted Marie, keeping time with her broom. Her voice was loud and monotonous, but Anna listened with a smile, and would have liked to join in, and so let some of her happiness find its way out.

She dressed quickly. There was no hot water, and no bell to ring for some, and she did not choose to call down from the window and interrupt the hymn, so she used cold water, assuring herself that it was bracing. Then she put on her hat and coat and stole out, afraid of disturbing Susie, who was lying a few yards away filled with smouldering wrath, anxious to have at least one quiet hour before beginning a day that she felt sure was going to be a day of worries. "There will be great peace to-night when she is gone," she thought, and immediately felt ashamed that she should look forward to being without her. "But I have never been without her since I was ten," she explained apologetically to her offended conscience, "and I want to see how I feel."

"*Guten Morgen*," said Marie, as Anna came into the drawing-room on her way out through its French windows.

"*Guten Morgen*," said Anna cheerfully.

Marie leaned on her broom and watched her go down the garden, greedily taking in every detail of her clothes, profoundly interested in a being who went out into the mud where nobody

could see her with such a dress on, and whose shoes would not have been too big for Marie's small sister aged nine.

The evening before, indeed, Marie had beheld such a vision as she had never yet in her life seen, or so much as imagined; her new mistress had appeared at supper in what was evidently a *herrschaftliche Ballkleid*, with naked arms and shoulders, and the other ladies were attired in much the same way. The young Fräulein, it is true, showed no bare flesh, but even she was arrayed in white, and her hair magnificently tied up with ribbons. Marie had rushed out to tell the cook, and the cook, refusing to believe it, had carried in a supererogatory dish of compot as an excuse for securing the assurance of her own eyes; and Bertha from the farm, coming round with a message from the Frau Oberinspector, had seen it too through the crack of the kitchen door as the ladies left the dining-room, and had gone off breathlessly to spread the news; and the post cart just leaving with the letters had carried it to Lohm, and every inhabitant of every house between Kleinwalde and Stralsund knew all about it before bedtime. "What did I tell thee, wife?" said Dellwig, who, in spite of his superiority to the sex that served, listened as eagerly as any member of it to gossip; and his wife was only too ready to label Anna mad or eccentric as a slight private consolation for having passed out of the service of a comprehensible German gentleman into that of a woman and a foreigner.

Unconscious of the interest and curiosity she was exciting for miles round, pleased by Marie's artless piety, and filled with

kindly feelings towards all her neighbours, Anna stood at the end of the garden looking over the low hedge that divided it from the marsh and the sea, and thought that she had never seen a place where it would be so easy to be good. Complete freedom from the wearisome obligations of society, an ideal privacy surrounded by her woods and the water, a scanty population of simple and devoted people—did not Dellwig shed tears at the remembrance of his master?—every day spent here would be a day that made her better, that would bring her nearer to that heaven in which all good and simple souls dwelt while still on earth, the heaven of a serene and quiet mind. Always she had longed to be good, and to help and befriend those who had the same longing but in whom it had been partially crushed by want of opportunity and want of peace. The healthy goodness that goes hand in hand with happiness was what she meant; not that tragic and futile goodness that grows out of grief, that lifts its head miserably in stony places, that flourishes in sick rooms and among desperate sorrows, and goes to God only because all else is lost. She went round the house and crossed the road into the forest. The fresh wind blew in her face, and shook down the drops from the branches on her as she passed. The pine needles of other years made a thick carpet for her feet. The sun gleamed through the straight trunks and warmed her. The restless sighing overheard in the tree tops filled her ears with sweetest music. "I do believe the place is pleased that I have come!" she thought, with a happy laugh. She came to a clearing in the trees, opening out towards

the north, and she could see the flat fields and the wide sky and the sunshine chasing the shadows across the vivid green patches that she had learned were winter rye. A hole at her feet, where a tree had been uprooted, still had snow in it; but the larks were singing above in the blue, as though from those high places they could see Spring far away in the south, coming up slowly with the first anemones in her hands, her face turned at last towards the patient north.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.