

E.WERNER

FICKLE

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CHAPTER I

'This is what they are pleased to call spring in these parts! The snow drifts thicker and thicker every minute, and the delightful north-east wind comes in vigorous blasts which threaten to carry us away into space, post-chaise and all. It is perfectly maddening.'

The carriage, one of the occupants of which thus gave vent to his ill-humour, was in truth working its way slowly and with difficulty through the accumulated snow on the high-road. Notwithstanding all their efforts, the horses could only advance at a foot-pace, so that the patience of the two travellers seated in the interior of the vehicle was put to a severe test.

Of these, the younger, who was attired in an elegant travelling-suit, far too light of texture, however, for the occasion, could certainly not be more than four-and-twenty years of age. All the hopefulness and confidence, or rather the bright audacity of youth beamed in his frank handsome face, in the dark eyes, which were bold and clear as though no trace of a shadow had ever clouded them. There was something peculiarly winning and agreeable about the young man's whole appearance, but he seemed highly impatient of the delay which now occurred in his

journey, and gave expression to his annoyance in every possible way.

His companion, on the other hand, appeared altogether calm and indifferent, as he sat, wrapped in his cloak, leaning well back in the other corner of the carriage. But a few years older than his friend, he possessed little of the latter's attractiveness. He was of powerful, rather than of graceful, build, and he bore himself with an ease which was almost nonchalance. His face would have passed muster as being, at least, full of character, though it could lay claim neither to beauty nor regularity of outline, but it was spoiled by an expression of stern reserve which chilled and repelled.

The deeper bitterness of life, its harsher experiences, could hardly have come home to one so young, and yet there was a look which spoke of these, a something not to be defined or accurately traced, which set on the countenance its own distinctive mark, and made the man appear much older than he really was. The abundant dark hair harmonised with the bushy dark eyebrows, but the eyes themselves were of that uncertain hue which is not generally approved. They made, indeed, scant appeal to the sympathies, expressing none of the happy vivacity, none of those passionate emotions wherein, as a rule, youth is so rich. Their cold unmoved survey was hard, and hardness characterised the young man's entire appearance and demeanour.

The gentleman above described had hitherto sat silent, looking out at the hurrying, driving snow; but now he turned, and in

answer to his companion's impatient exclamation, said:

'You forget that we are no longer in Italy, Edmund. In our climate, and especially here among the mountains, March counts among the winter months.'

'Ah me, my beautiful Italy! There we left all bathed in sunshine and fragrant with flowers, and here at home we are received by a snowstorm imported direct from the North Pole, You seem, however, to find no fault with the temperature. The whole journey has been nothing to you but just a troublesome task to be got through. Don't deny it, Oswald. Could you have chosen, you would rather have stayed at home with your books.'

Oswald shrugged his shoulders.

'What I wished, or did not wish, was not taken into consideration. It was decided that you were not to travel without a companion. I therefore simply had to obey orders.'

'Yes, you were given to me as a Mentor,' laughed Edmund; 'charged with the high mission of watching over me, and, at need, of applying a salutary check.'

'In which I certainly have not succeeded. You have committed follies innumerable.'

'Bah! of what use is it to be young and rich, if one is not to enjoy life? I must say this, I have always had to enjoy it by myself. You have not been a good comrade to me, Oswald, my friend. What made you always draw back into your shell in that obstinate, sombre fashion?'

'Because I knew, and know, that what is permitted to the heir

of Ettersberg, or what, at most, will be condoned with a few tender reproaches, would be esteemed a crime in me,' was the brusque reply.

'Nonsense!' cried Edmund. 'You know very well that I should have taken the whole responsibility on myself. As it is, I must take all the blame. Well, the judgment on my backslidings will not be over-severe, I warrant, whereas, when you on our return publicly announce your plans for the future, you may hold yourself prepared for a storm.'

'I know that,' replied Oswald laconically.

'But I shall not stand by you this time as I did before, when you so decidedly refused to enter the army,' went on the young Count. 'I got you through that, for I naturally thought you would go into a Government office. We all thought so, looked upon it as a thing decided, and now you suddenly come forward with this insane idea of yours.'

'The idea is neither so new nor so insane as you suppose. It had germinated and taken root in my mind when I began my University career with you. I have directed all my studies with a view to it; but as I wished to avoid a useless conflict lasting through years, I have been silent until now, when the time for the decision has come.'

'I warn you, this project of yours will set the whole family in commotion. And I must say it is a most extraordinary one. Think of an Ettersberg turning barrister, and taking up the defence of any thief or forger who comes in his way! My mother will never

hear of it, and she will be perfectly right. Now, if you were to enter a Government office—'

'Years must elapse before I should have mounted the first grades, and during that time I must be altogether dependent on you and your mother.'

This was said in so harsh and curt a tone that Edmund drew himself up quickly.

'Oswald, have I ever let you feel that?'

'You—never! But your very generosity makes me feel it more.'

'So here we are on the old ground again! You are capable of doing the most idiotic thing in the world, merely to shake off this so-called dependence. But what is the matter, I wonder? Why has the carriage stopped? I really believe we are fast in the snow here on the main-road.'

Oswald had already let down the window, and was looking out.

'What is up?' he asked.

'We are stuck,' was the phlegmatic reply of the post-boy, who seemed to consider the thing as perfectly natural.

'Oh, we are stuck, are we!' repeated Edmund, with an irritated laugh. 'And the man informs us of it with that sweet philosophic calm. Well, granted we are stuck. What is to be done?'

Oswald made no reply, but opened the carriage-door and stepped out. The situation could be taken in at a glance; agreeable it certainly was not. From the spot they had reached, the road descended in a steep incline, and the narrow defile through which they must pass was completely blocked by an enormous drift.

There the snow lay several feet high, and presented so compact a mass that to get through it seemed impossible. The coachman and horses must have become aware of this simultaneously, for the latter ceased all exertion, and the former sat with drooping whip and reins, gazing at his two passengers as though he expected from them counsel or assistance.

'This confounded post-chaise!' burst forth Edmund, who had followed his companion's example and alighted in his turn. 'Why the deuce had not we our own horses sent out to meet us! We shall not reach Ettersberg now before dark. Driver, we must get on!'

'There is no getting on, sir,' replied the latter, with imperturbable serenity. 'You, gentlemen, can see it for yourselves.'

The young Count was about to make an angry retort, when Oswald laid his hand on his arm.

'The man is right. It really is not to be done. With these two horses only we cannot possibly advance. There is nothing left us but to stop here a while in the carriage, and to send the post-boy on to the next station to procure us a relay.'

'So that we may be snowed up here meanwhile. Rather than that, I would go on to the post-house on foot.'

Oswald's eyes travelled with a somewhat sarcastic glance over his comrade's dress, which was suited only to a railway *coupé* or a carriage.

'You propose going through the woods on foot in that attire?

Along a path where one sinks to the knee at every step? But you will take cold standing here exposed to this sharp wind. Have my cloak.'

So saying, and without more ado, he unfastened his cloak, and placed it about the Count's shoulders, the latter protesting violently, but in vain.

'Do not give it to me; you will have no protection yourself against the wind and weather.'

'Nothing hurts me. I am not delicate.'

'And, in your opinion, I am?' inquired Edmund tetchily.

'No, only spoilt. But now we must come to some decision. Either we must stay here in the carriage and send on the post-boy, or we must endeavour to push forwards by the footpath. Decide quickly. What is to be done?'

'What an abominable way you have of summing up things!' said Edmund, with a sigh. 'You are constantly setting one an alternative—choose this or that. How do I know if the footpath is practicable?'

Here the discussion was interrupted. The snorting of horses and the thud of hoofs on the snow were heard at some little distance, and through the mist and falling flakes a second carriage could be seen approaching. The powerful animals which drew it overcame with tolerable ease the difficulties of the way, until they reached the formidable descent. Here they, too, came to a stand. The coachman drew rein, contemplated the block before him with an ominous shake of the head, and then turned to

speaking to some one inside the carriage. His report was evidently as unsatisfactory as that delivered by the post-boy, and was received with a like impatience. The answer, which came in a clear, youthful voice, was given sharply and with much energy:

'It is all of no use, Anthony. We must get through.'

'But, Fräulein, if it can't be done!' objected the coachman.

'Nonsense! it *must* be done. I will just look for myself.'

No sooner were the words spoken in a most decided tone than they were carried into effect. The carriage-door flew open, and a young lady—a lady of whose youth there could be no possible doubt—sprang out. She appeared to be familiar with the March temperature of this mountainous country, and to have taken the necessary precautionary measures, for her costume was one suited to winter. She wore a dark travelling-dress, and over it a fur-trimmed jacket well buttoned about her slender figure, while securely pinned about her hat was a thick veil which covered head and face. The fact that on alighting her foot sank into the soft snow almost to the border of her boot seemed in no way to affect her. She advanced valiantly a few steps, then stopped on beholding another carriage drawn up just before her own.

The attention of the two gentlemen had, of course, also been attracted. Oswald, indeed, merely bestowed a cursory glance on the new-comer, and then addressed his mind again to the critical situation in which they found themselves; but Edmund, on the other hand, at once lost all interest in it.

He left to his companion any further consideration of the

difficulty. In an instant he was at the stranger's side, and, executing a bow as elaborate as though they had been in a drawing-room, spoke thus:

'Pardon me, Fräulein, but I perceive we are not the only persons surprised by this incomparable spring weather. It is always consolatory to meet with companions in misfortune; and as we are exposed to a like danger, that of being completely, hopelessly snowed up, you will allow us to offer you our aid and assistance.'

In making this chivalrous offer. Count Ettersberg lost sight of the fact that he and Oswald were as yet helpless themselves, having found no way of overcoming the obstacle in their path. Unfortunately, he was at once taken at his word, for the young lady, no whit abashed by a stranger's address, replied promptly in her former decided tone:

'Well, have the kindness then to make us a way through the snow.'

'I?' asked Edmund, dismayed. 'You wish me to—'

'I wish you to make us a road through the snow—most certainly I do, sir.'

'With the utmost pleasure, Fräulein, if only you will be so good as to tell me how I am to set about it.'

The toe of her little boot tapped the ground vigorously, and there was some slight asperity in her reply.

'I fancied you might have found out that already, as you proffered your help. Well, we must get through some way, no

matter how it is managed.'

With this, the speaker threw back her veil, and proceeded to inspect the situation. The withdrawal of that dark blue gauze revealed features of such unwonted loveliness that Edmund, in his surprise, forgot to make response. A fairer sight, indeed, could hardly have been beheld than the face of this young girl, rose-tinted by the action of the keen mountain air. Her brown curly hair peeped and struggled rebelliously out of the silken net which sought to confine it. Her eyes, of the deepest, deepest blue, were not serene and calm as blue eyes are expected to be; on the contrary, they gleamed and sparkled with the saucy merriment which youth and happiness alone can give. Every smile brought a charming, delicious little dimple into either cheek, but there was an expression about the small mouth which hinted at waywardness and defiance; and it might well be that in that little head, beneath those rebellious locks, there lodged a child's caprice, all a child's manifold wilful conceits. Perhaps it was precisely this which gave to the face its own peculiar, piquant charm, which fascinated irresistibly, and forced those who had once looked to look again.

The young lady was by no means unaware of the impression her appearance had created. To the consciousness of it was due, no doubt, the involuntary smile which now chased the petulance from her features. Edmund's silence was not of long duration. Timidity and a want of self-confidence were not among his failings, and he was about to renew the attack with a well-turned

compliment when Oswald came up and spoke.

'The difficulty can be overcome,' he said, bowing slightly to the stranger. 'If you, Fräulein, will allow us to harness your horses to our team, it will be possible in the first place to get the post-chaise through the snow, and then to proceed with your carriage in its track.'

'Uncommonly practical!' said Edmund, who was considerably annoyed at being thus interrupted, at the check to his compliment, and to the further development of his many delightful qualities. The young lady appeared somewhat surprised at the curt dry tone in which the proposal was made. The highly unpractical admiration of herself manifested by Count Ettersberg was evidently more to her taste than the cold commonsense of his companion.

She replied, speaking rather shortly in her turn:

'Pray do exactly as you think best.' Then she instructed the coachman to obey the gentleman's orders, and turning to her carriage, prepared to seek a shelter therein from the persistent, thickly-falling snow.

Edmund promptly followed. He felt it incumbent on him to help her in, after which he took up his station on the carriage-step, in order to keep her informed of the progress of the business which Oswald had energetically taken in hand.

'Now the procession has started,' he began his report, the carriage-window having been lowered to facilitate communication. 'They can hardly advance even with the double

team. Ah, there, as they go downhill, things look serious. The ramshackle old post-chaise cracks and shakes at every joint; the two men are as awkward in driving as they can possibly be. It is lucky that my companion is commandant of the troop. If there is a thing he thoroughly understands, and in which he excels, it is the art of commanding! Upon my word, they are making a breach in the snow-rampart! They will manage it. Oswald is over yonder already, pointing out to them the direction they are to take.'

'While you are securely posted on my carriage-step,' remarked the young lady, rather caustically.

'Why, Fräulein, you would not require of me to leave you all alone here on the highroad,' said Edmund, taking up his defence. 'Some one must stay here to protect you.'

'I do not think there is any danger of an attack by robbers. Our highways are safe, so far as I know. But you seem to have a fancy for your point of vantage.'

'Whence I enjoy so charming a prospect, yes.'

This too gallant speech was evidently distasteful, for instantaneously the dark blue veil was lowered, and the vaunted prospect disappeared from view. Count Edmund was a little discomfited. He saw his error, and grew more respectful.

A quarter of an hour had well-nigh elapsed before the chaise could be got over the difficult ground. At length it stood secure on the other side. Oswald retraced his steps, and the coachman followed with the horses. Edmund was still on the carriage-step. He had, as it seemed, received absolution for the impertinence of

which he had been guilty, for a most animated conversation was going on between the lady and her self-appointed guardian. The former took, however, a certain malicious pleasure in concealing her features from view. Her veil was still closely drawn when Oswald again approached.

'I must beg of you to alight, Fräulein,' he said. 'The descent is rather precipitous, and the snow is deep. Our post-chaise was several times within an ace of being overturned, and your carriage is much heavier. It might be a risk for you to remain in it.'

'What an idea, Oswald!' cried Edmund. 'How can this lady pass along such a road on foot? It is impossible!'

'Not so, only rather uncomfortable,' was the unmoved reply. 'The carriages will have formed some sort of a track; if we follow in that, the journey will really not be so difficult as you imagine. Of course, if the lady is afraid to venture—'

'Afraid?' she interrupted, in an angry tone. 'Pray, sir, do not attribute any such excessive timidity to me. I shall most certainly venture, and that at once.'

So saying, she jumped out of the carriage, and next minute was braving the elements on the open road. Here the wind caught the veil which had been so persistently held down, and it fluttered high in the air. True, the little hand clutched quickly at the truant gauze, but it had wound itself about the hat, and the attempt to regain control of it failed signally; to the great satisfaction of Count Edmund, who was now able to enjoy the 'prospect' without

let or hindrance.

Meanwhile the horses had been harnessed to the second carriage. Ruts having previously been made in the snow, the journey this time was more easily performed. Nevertheless, Oswald, who followed closely in the wake of the vehicle, was constantly obliged to offer his guidance and assistance. The driving snow knew no intermission, and the great white flakes whirled round and round, chased by the wind. The high dyke-walls on either side of the road were seen but indistinctly as through a veil, while all further prospect was completely blotted out, hidden in dense mist. It needed the elastic spirits of youth to support with philosophy so severe an ordeal, to find in it food for mirth. Fortunately, this talismanic quality was possessed by the two younger travellers in a high degree. The difficult progress, in the course of which they sank at each step ankle-deep into the snow, the incessant struggle with the wind, all the difficulties, great and small, which had to be overcome, were to them an inexhaustible source of merriment. Their lively talk never flagged an instant. Repartees flowed backwards and forwards rocketwise. Each joke was caught in its passage, and sent back with interest. Neither would allow the other to have the last word, and all this badinage went on as unrestrainedly, in as frank and natural a manner, as though the two had been acquainted for years.

At length the journey was performed, and the summit of the opposite hill reached in safety. Here the road branched off in two

directions, and no further obstruction was to be apprehended. The carriages stood side by side, and the respective teams were speedily harnessed in their proper order.

'We shall have to part company now,' said the young lady, pointing to the divergent routes. 'You, no doubt, will continue along the highroad, while my destination lies in the other direction.'

'At no very great distance, I hope,' said Edmund quickly. 'I beg pardon, but all the small misadventures of this journey have done away with anything like etiquette. We have not even told you our names. Under the very exceptional circumstances, you will allow me, *Fräulein*—here a violent gust of wind blew the cape of his cloak about his ears, and dashed a shower of wet flakes in his face—'you will allow me to introduce myself, your humble servant. Count Edmund von Ettersberg, who at the same time has the honour of presenting his cousin, Oswald von Ettersberg. You will excuse the reverence which should accompany these words. Our friend Boreas is capable of prostrating me at your feet in the snow.'

The young lady started at the mention of his name.

'Count Edmund? The heir of Ettersberg?'

'At your service.'

The stranger's lips twitched as with a strong inclination to laughter forcibly restrained.

'And you have acted as my protector? We have mutually helped each other in need with our horses. Oh, that is admirable!'

'My name would appear to be familiar to you,' said Edmund. 'May I in my turn learn—'

'Who I am? No, Count, you certainly will not learn that now. But I would advise you not to mention this meeting of ours at Ettersberg, for, innocent as we are in the matter, the avowal would, I think, at once place us both beyond the pale of the law.'

Here the young lady's self-control gave way, and she broke out into such a peal of merry laughter that Oswald looked at her in surprise. Not a whit disconcerted, Edmund immediately adopted the same tone.

'It seems that there exists between us a certain secret connection of which I had no idea,' he said. 'The secret, however, appears to be of a cheerful nature, and though you decline to raise the veil of your incognito, you will, I am sure, permit me to enjoy my share of the joke,' whereupon he joined in her merriment, laughing as heartily and extravagantly as herself.

'The carriages are ready,' said Oswald, breaking in upon this noisy gaiety. 'It is time, I think, for us to be setting out again.'

The two suddenly ceased laughing, and looked as though they considered such an interruption to be most unmannerly. The young lady threw back her head with an angry toss, looked at the speaker from head to foot, and then without more ado turned her back on him, and walked towards the carriage. Edmund naturally accompanied her. He pushed aside the coachman, who was standing by the wheel ready to assist, lifted his beautiful *protégée* in, and closed the door.

'And I really am not to hear whom chance has thrown in my way in this kind, but all too transitory, manner?' he asked, with a profound bow.

'No, Count. Possibly some explanation may be given you at home—that is, if my *signalement* be known there. I, most certainly, shall not solve the enigma. One question more, however. Is your cousin always as polite and as sociable as he has shown himself to-day?

'Ah, you would say that he has not opened his lips once during the whole of our walk. Yes, that is unfortunately his way with strangers. As for any sense of gallantry, of deference towards ladies!' Edmund sighed. 'Ah, you little know, Fräulein, what efforts I have to make, how often I have to intervene and make amends for his utter deficiency in that respect.'

'Well, you seem to accept the task with much self-abnegation,' replied the young lady mischievously; 'and you have an extraordinary predilection for mounting carriage-steps. Why, you are up there again!'

Edmund certainly was up there, and would probably long have retained the position, had not the coachman, who now grasped the reins, given visible signs of impatience. The beautiful unknown graciously inclined her head.

'Many thanks for your kindness. Adieu.'

'Adieu, for the present only, I may hope,' cried Edmund eagerly.

'For heaven's sake, hope nothing of the kind. We must forego

any such wild notion. You will see it yourself before long. Adieu, Count von Ettersberg.'

These farewell words were followed by the musical, merry laugh. The horses pulled with a will, and the young man had only just time to jump from his standing-point on the step.

'Will you have the kindness to get in at last?'—this in the remonstrant tones of Oswald's voice. 'You were in such a great hurry to reach home, you know, and we are considerably behind time now.'

Edmund cast one more glance at the carriage which was whirling from him his charming new acquaintance. Presently it disappeared among the trees. Then he obeyed his cousin's summons.

'Oswald, who was the lady?' he asked quickly, as the post-chaise in its turn began to move onwards.

'Why on earth ask me? How should I know?'

'Well, you were long enough away with the carriage. You might have inquired of the coachman.'

'It is not my way to question coachmen. Besides, the matter possesses little interest for me.'

'Well, it possesses a good deal for me,' said Edmund irritably. 'But it is just like you. You don't consider it worth while to put a question, though of course, as you are full well aware, one would like to have the matter cleared up. I really don't quite know what to make of the girl. She emits sparks, so to say, at the slightest contact—she attracts and repels in a breath. One minute you feel

as if you may address her with perfect unconstraint, and the next you find yourself scared back to the most respectful distance. A most seductive little witch!"

'Exceedingly spoilt and wilful, I should say,' remarked Oswald drily.

'What an abominable pedant you are!' cried the young Count. 'You have always some fault to find. It is precisely her capricious, merry wilfulness which makes the girl so irresistible. But who in the world can she be? I saw no crest on the carriage-panels. The coachman wore a plain livery without any particular badge. Some middle-class family in the neighbourhood, evidently; and yet she seemed to know us very well. Why refuse to give her name? why that allusion to some connection existing between us? In vain I rack my brains to find some explanation.'

Oswald, who seemed to think such mental exertion on his cousin's part most unnecessary, leaned back in his corner in silence, and the journey was continued without further obstacle, but with the tedious slowness which had characterised it throughout. To the Count's great annoyance, instead of the four horses they desired and expected, two only could be had at each relay. In consequence of the downfall of snow, the available animals at each post-house had been put into requisition, so that the travellers had lost fully a couple of hours on the road since they started from the railway-station at noon. It was growing dark when the carriage at length rolled into the courtyard of Castle Ettersberg, where their arrival had evidently long been looked

for. The portals of the spacious and brilliantly lighted hall were thrown open, and at the sound of approaching wheels a goodly band of servants hastened to receive their master. One of these, an old retainer, who, like the rest, wore the handsome Ettersberg livery, came straight up to the carriage.

'Good-evening, Everard,' cried Edmund joyfully. 'Here we are at last, in spite of snow and stress of weather. All is well at home, I hope.'

'Quite well, the Lord be praised. Count! but her ladyship was growing very anxious at the delay. She was afraid the young gentlemen had met with a mishap.'

As he spoke, Everard opened the carriage-door, and at that moment a lady of tall and imposing stature, clad in a dark silk robe, appeared at the head of a flight of steps which led from the entrance-hall into the interior of the castle. To spring out of the carriage, to rush into the hall and bound up the steps, was, for Edmund, the affair of an instant. Next minute he was fast in his mother's embrace.

'Dearest mother, what happiness to see you again at last!'

There was nothing in the young Count's exclamation of that light, airy playfulness which had marked his every utterance hitherto. His tone was genuine now, coming from the heart, and a like passionate tenderness thrilled the voice and illumined the features of the Countess as she folded her son in her arms again, and kissed him.

'My Edmund!'

'We are late, are we not? The block on the roads and the detestable arrangements at the post-houses are to blame for it. Moreover, we had a little adventure by the way.'

'How could you travel at all in such weather?' said the Countess, in a tone of loving reproach. 'I was hourly expecting a telegram to say that you would stay the night in B—, and come on here to-morrow.'

'What! Be separated from you four-and-twenty hours longer?' Edmund broke in. 'No, mother, I certainly should not have agreed to that, and you did not believe it of me either.'

The mother smiled. 'No; and for that very reason I have been in distress about you for several hours. But come now, you must need some refreshment after your long and arduous journey.'

She would have taken her son's arm to lead him away, but he stood still, and said a little reproachfully:

'You do not see Oswald, mother.'

Oswald von Ettersberg had followed his cousin in silence. He stood a little aside in the shadow of the great staircase, only emerging from it now as the Countess turned towards him.

'Welcome home, Oswald.'

The greeting was very cool—cool and formal as the salute by which the young man responded to it. He just touched his aunt's hand with his lips, and as he did so, her glance travelled over his attire.

'Why, you are wet through!' she exclaimed in surprise. 'How came that to be?'

'Oh, I forgot to tell you!' cried Edmund. 'When we had to alight, he gave me his cloak, and braved the storm himself without it. Oswald,' he went on, turning to his cousin, 'I might have given it back to you in the carriage at least; why did you not remind me of it? Now you have been sitting a whole hour in that wet coat. I do trust you will take no harm from it.'

He took off the cloak hastily, and passed his hand inquiringly over Oswald's shoulder, which certainly bore evidence of a good wetting. The other shook him off.

'Don't. It is not worth speaking of.'

'I really think not,' said the Countess, to whom this kindly concern on her son's part was evidently distasteful. 'You know that Oswald is not susceptible to the influence of the weather. He must change his clothes, that is all. Go, Oswald; but no, one word more,' she added carelessly, and, as it were, by an afterthought: 'I have this time given you another room, one situated over yonder, in the side-wing.'

'For what reason?' asked Edmund, surprised and annoyed. 'You know that we have always had our rooms together.'

'I have made some alterations in your apartments, my son,' said the Countess, in a tone of much decision; 'and they have obliged me to take possession of Oswald's room. He will have no objection, I am sure. He will find himself very comfortably lodged over yonder in the tower-chamber.'

'No doubt, aunt.'

The reply sounded quiet and indifferent enough, yet there

was something in its tone which struck on the Count's ear unpleasantly.

He frowned, and would have spoken again, but glancing at the servants standing round, he suppressed the remark he had been about to make. Instead of pursuing the discussion, he went up to his cousin and grasped his hand.

'Well, we can talk this over later on. Go now, Oswald, and change your clothes at once—at once, do you hear? If you keep those wet things on any longer, you will give me cause for serious self-reproach. Do it to please me; we will wait dinner for you.'

'Edmund, you seem to forget that I am waiting for you.'

'One minute, mother. Everard, light Herr von Ettersberg to his room, and see that he has dry clothes ready without delay.'

So saying, he turned to his mother, and offered his arm to lead her away. Oswald had responded by no single syllable to all the concern on his account so heartily expressed. He stood for a few seconds, looking after the two as they departed; then, as the old servant approached, he took the candelabrum from his hand.

'That will do, Everard; I can find my way alone. Look after my trunk, will you?'

He turned into the faintly illumined corridor which led to the side-wing of the castle. The wax tapers he carried threw their clear light on the young man's face, from which, now that he was alone, the mask of indifference had dropped. The lips were tightly compressed, the brows contracted, and an expression of bitterness, almost of hate, distorted his features, as he murmured

to himself under his breath:

'Will the day never come when I shall be free?'

CHAPTER II

The house of Ettersberg had originally been great, and had boasted many branches; but in the course of years death and the marriage of the female descendants had lopped off one good member after another, so that at the time of which this story treats there were, besides the widowed Countess who lived at the patronymic castle, but two representatives of the name, Count Edmund, the heir, and his cousin Oswald.

The latter shared the fate common to younger sons in families where the property is strictly entailed. Destitute of any personal fortune, he was entirely dependent on the head of his house, or must be so, at least, until he had carved out for himself a position in life. Things had not always worn this aspect; on the contrary, he had at his birth been greeted by his parents as the presumptive heir to the family lands. The then head of the family, Edmund's father, was childless, and already well advanced in years when he became a widower; his only brother, a man considerably younger than himself, who held a commission in the army, might therefore legitimately count on the prospective inheritance. It was esteemed a special piece of good fortune for this gentleman when, after many years of wedlock, blessed so far only by the advent of daughters early deceased, a son was born to him. The uncle himself gladly hailed the event as assuring the continuance of his race, and during the first years of infancy, the prospects

of little Oswald were as brilliant as heart could desire.

Then occurred a most unlooked-for reversal of fortune. Count Ettersberg, a sexagenarian and more, led to the altar as his second wife a girl of twenty. The young Countess was very beautiful, but she came of a ruined, though of a noble house. It was generally said that the family had spared no exertions to bring about so splendid an alliance. Splendid the match might certainly be called; but it was ill-qualified to satisfy the needs of a youthful heart, especially as, so it was whispered, this suit had interfered with, and roughly broken asunder, the bonds of a previous attachment. Whether absolute constraint, or persuasion only, had been used on the part of the relations, no one knew; however prompted, the young lady gave her consent to a marriage which insured her a brilliant and most enviable position. Old Count Ettersberg succumbed so completely to the influence of this tardily kindled passion that he forgot all else in it, and when a scarcely hoped-for happiness befell him, when a son and heir was placed in his arms, the dominion of his wise and beautiful wife became absolute.

It was natural that the younger brother should feel somewhat aggrieved at the utter destruction of all his prospects, and natural too that his sister-in-law should entertain towards him no feelings of special friendship. The affectionate relations formerly existing between the brothers gave place to a coldness and estrangement which lasted until the death of the younger. The Colonel and his wife died within but a short interval, and the orphan boy was

taken to his uncle's house and there brought up on equal terms with the young heir.

But old Count Ettersberg did not survive his brother long. By his will he assigned the guardianship of the two boys to Baron Heideck, his wife's brother, and the latter justified the confidence placed in him, standing by his sister in every circumstance where a man's aid and assistance became necessary.

In general, however, the will assured to the Countess perfect freedom and independence of action. She it was who, in reality, had control of the property, and who directed the education of both son and nephew.

This latter was at length complete. Count Edmund had been absent all the winter, travelling through France and Italy in his cousin's company. He had now returned to make himself acquainted with the management of his estates, which at his approaching majority he was to take upon himself, while Oswald had to prepare to enter one of the Government bureaux.

On the day succeeding the arrival of the two young men, the weather cleared a little, though the outer world still presented a most wintry aspect. The Countess was sitting with her son in her own boudoir. Though she stood midway between forty and fifty, the lady yet in a great measure retained the beauty which once had been dazzling. Her appearance, albeit majestic, was still so youthful, that it was difficult to imagine her the mother of this son of two-and-twenty, more especially as there was no

single trait of resemblance between them. Edmund, with his dark hair and eyes, his sparkling gaiety and mobile humour, which manifested itself in every word and gesture, was a direct contrast to his grave, beautiful mother. Her fair tresses and calm blue eyes harmonised with the cool serenity of mien peculiar to her, a serenity which towards her darling alone would occasionally yield to a warmer impulse.

The young Count had apparently been making an open breast with regard to what Oswald termed his 'follies innumerable,' but he could not have found it hard to obtain absolution, for his mother, though she shook her head as she spoke, addressed him in a tone more tender than reproachful.

'You madcap! It is time for me to take you in hand again. In the perfect unconstraint you have enjoyed abroad, the maternal rein has grown slack indeed. Will you bear it again, now that you have come back to me?'

'Bear control from you?—always!' returned Edmund, pressing his lips fervently to her white hand. Then relapsing immediately into his former lighthearted, saucy vein, he added: 'I told Oswald beforehand that the verdict on my misdeeds would be a merciful one. I know my lady mother well.'

The Countess's face darkened.

'Oswald seems to have altogether neglected his duty,' she replied. 'I could discover so much from your letters. As the elder and steadier of the two, he should have remained at your side; instead of which he left you to yourself, going only where he was

absolutely obliged to follow. Had your own nature not preserved you from anything worse than folly, his counsels certainly would not have done so.'

'Oh, he preached enough,' said Edmund. 'It was my fault, you know, if I did not listen to him. But before we say anything more, mother, let me put one question. Why has Oswald been banished to the side-wing?'

'Banished! What an expression! You have seen the alterations I have had made in your rooms. Are you not pleased with the new arrangements?'

'Yes, but—'

'It was necessary for you to have your apartments distinct.' The Countess interrupted him quickly. 'Now that you are about to take possession of your own house, it would not be seemly for you to share your rooms with your cousin. He will see that himself.'

'But it was not necessary to send him over to that old part of the castle, which is only used in exceptional cases,' objected Edmund. 'There are rooms enough and to spare in the main building. Oswald was hurt by this arrangement of yours. I could see it plainly. Have it altered—I beg of you.'

'I cannot do that without making myself ridiculous in the eyes of all the servants,' said the Countess, in a very decided tone. 'If you wish to revoke the orders I have expressly given, you are, of course, at liberty to do so.'

'Mother!' exclaimed the young Count, impatiently. 'You know

very well that I never interfere with your proceedings. But this might have stood over for a time. Oswald will be leaving us in a few months.'

'Yes, in the autumn. By then my brother will have taken all necessary steps to introduce him into one of the Government offices.'

Edmund looked down.

'I rather think Oswald has other plans for the future,' he said, with some hesitation.

'Other plans?' repeated the Countess. 'I trust that we shall not encounter disobedience from him a second time. Once, when he rebelled against entering the army, I yielded, thanks to your persuasion and advocacy. You were always on his side. I have not yet forgiven him his wilful, defiant conduct on that occasion.'

'It was not defiance,' pleaded Edmund in defence. 'Only the conviction he felt that, as an officer and the representative of an old and noble name, he would not be able to keep up his position in the army without permanent assistance from us.'

'Assistance you would amply have afforded him.'

'But which he would on no account accept. He possesses, as you know, indomitable pride.'

'Say rather unbounded arrogance,' interrupted the Countess. 'I know the quality, for I have had to battle with it since the day he first came to this house. But for my husband's formally expressed desire that this nephew should share your education and opportunities, I would never have left you so exclusively to

his companionship. I never liked him. I cannot endure those cold searching eyes, which are always on the alert, which nothing escapes, not even the best-guarded secret.'

Edmund laughed out loud.

'Why, mother, you are making a regular detective of Oswald. He certainly is a particularly keen observer, as may be noted from his occasional remarks on men and things which strike no one else as peculiar. Here, at Ettersberg, he can, however, hardly put his talents to account. We have, thank God, no secrets for him to discover.'

The Countess bent over some papers lying on the table, and seemed to be seeking for something among them.

'No matter,' she said. 'I never could understand your blind partiality for him. You, with your frank, warm, open nature, and Oswald with his icy reserve! You are about as congenial as fire and water.'

'The very contrast may be the cause of our mutual attraction,' said Edmund, jestingly. 'Oswald is not the most amiable person in the world, that I must admit; towards me he decidedly is not amiable at all. Nevertheless, I feel myself drawn to him, and he in turn is attracted to me—I know it.'

'You think so?' said the Countess, coldly. 'You are mistaken, most mistaken. Oswald is one of the class who hate those from whom they must accept benefits. He has never forgiven me the fact that my marriage destroyed his own and his father's prospects, and he cannot forgive you for standing between him

and the property. I know him better than you do.'

Edmund was silent. He was aware from experience that any advocacy from him only made matters worse; for it surely aroused the maternal jealousy, always prompt to ignite when he spoke openly of his affection for this cousin, the comrade of his youth.

Moreover, the conversation was here brought to a natural end, the subject of it at this moment appearing upon the scene.

Oswald's greeting was as formal, and the Countess's reply as cool, as their manner had been on the preceding evening. Unfavourable as were the lady's sentiments towards her nephew, the duty of this morning call and of daily inquiries after her health was rigorously imposed upon him. On the present occasion the tour so recently concluded furnished food for discourse. Edmund related some of their adventures; Oswald supplemented his cousin's account, putting in a finishing touch here and there, and so it happened that the visit, which in general was exceedingly brief, had soon passed the usual quarter of an hour's limit.

'You have both altered during the past six months,' said the Countess, at length. 'Your bronzed complexion especially, Edmund, gives you quite the appearance of a Southerner.'

'I have often been taken for one,' replied Edmund. 'In the matter of complexion I have unfortunately inherited nothing from my beautiful fair mother.'

The Countess smiled.

'I think you may be satisfied with what Nature has done for you. You certainly do not resemble me. There is more likeness to your father.'

'To my uncle? Hardly,' remarked Oswald.

'How can you be a judge of that?' asked the Countess, rather sharply. 'You and Edmund were mere boys when my husband died.'

'No, mother; don't trouble yourself to try and discover a likeness,' interposed Edmund. 'I certainly have but a vague remembrance of my father; but, you know, we possess a portrait life-size, which was taken when he was in his prime. I have not a single feature of that face, and it really is strange, when you come to think of it, for in our race the family traits have usually been especially marked. Look at Oswald, for instance. He is an Ettersberg from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. He is in every feature an exact copy of the old family portraits in the gallery yonder, which from one generation to another went on reproducing the same lines and contours. Heaven only knows why this historical resemblance should be denied to me alone! What are you gazing at me in that way for, Oswald?'

The young man's eyes were, indeed, fixed on his cousin's face with a keen and searching scrutiny.

'I think you are right,' he replied. 'You have not a single Ettersberg feature.'

'That is but another of your venturesome assertions,' said the Countess, in a tone of sharp rebuke. 'It frequently happens that

a family likeness, absent in youth, grows striking as the person advances in years. That will, no doubt, be the case with Edmund.'

The young Count laughed and shook his head.

'I doubt it. I am formed in altogether a different mould. Indeed, I often wonder how I, with my hot, excitable blood, my thoughtlessness and high spirits, for which I am always being lectured, could come of a race so desperately wise and virtuous; in fact, rather slow and stupid from overmuch virtue. Oswald, now, would represent the family far better than I.'

'Edmund!' cried the Countess indignantly.

It was uncertain whether her remonstrance applied to the young man's last assertion, or to his irreverent mention of his forefathers.

'Well, I ask pardon of the shades of my ancestors,' said Edmund, rather abashed. 'You see, mother, I have none of their traditional excellences, not even that of sober sense.'

'My aunt was meaning something else, I fancy,' said Oswald quietly.

The Countess pressed her lips together tightly. Her face plainly betokened the dislike she had avowed to the cold, searching eyes now resting upon her.

'Enough of this dispute on the subject of family likeness,' she said, waiving the point. 'Tradition affords at least as many exceptions as rules. Oswald, I wish you would look through these papers. You have some legal knowledge. Our solicitor seems to consider the issue of the affair as doubtful, but I am sanguine,

and Edmund is of my opinion, that we must follow out the matter to the end.'

So saying, she pushed the papers, which were lying on the table, across to her nephew, who glanced at their contents.

'Ah, yes. They refer to the lawsuit against Councillor Rüstow of Brunneck.'

'Good heavens! is not that business settled yet?' asked Edmund. 'Why, the suit was on before we left home six months ago.'

Oswald smiled rather ironically.

'You appear to have peculiar notions as to the length of our legal procedure. It may go on for years. If you will allow me, aunt, I will take these papers with me to my own room to look through them, unless Edmund would prefer to see them first.'

'Oh no, spare me all that!' cried Edmund, parrying the threatened infliction. 'I have forgotten pretty nearly all about the business. This Rüstow married a daughter of Uncle Francis, I know; and he raises a claim to the Dornau estate, which my uncle bequeathed to me.'

'And with perfect justice,' added the Countess; 'for that marriage took place against his wish, expressly declared. His daughter, by her *mésalliance*, broke with him and with the entire family. It was natural, under such circumstances, that he should disinherit her absolutely; and just as natural, there being no nearer relations, that he should annex Dornau to the entailed family estates by leaving it to you.'

A slight cloud gathered on Edmund's brow as he listened to this statement.

'It may be so, but the whole subject is painful to me. What do I, the owner of Ettersberg, want with the possession of Dornau? I seem to be intruding on the rights of others, who, in spite of wills and family squabbles, are the direct and proper heirs. What I should prefer would be to see a compromise effected.'

'That is impossible,' said the Countess decidedly. 'Rüstow's attitude, from the very commencement of the affair, has been such as to preclude any idea of an arrangement. The way in which he attacked the will and proceeded against you, the acknowledged heir, was downright insulting, and would make any show of concession on our part appear as unpardonable weakness. Besides which, you have no right to set at nought the wishes of your relative as expressed in his will. It was his desire to shut out this "Frau Rüstow" from any share in his fortune.'

'But she has been dead for years,' objected Edmund. 'And her husband would not in any case be entitled to inherit.'

'No; but he advances a claim on behalf of his daughter.'

The two young men looked up simultaneously.

'His daughter? So he has a daughter?'

'Certainly, a girl of about eighteen, I believe.'

'And this young lady and I are the hostile claimants?'

'Just so; but why this sudden interest in the matter?'

'Eureka, I have it!' cried Edmund. 'Oswald, this is our charming acquaintance of yesterday. I see now why the meeting

struck her as being so indescribably comic—why she refused to give her name. The allusion to a certain connection existing between us becomes intelligible. It all fits in, word for word. There can be no possible doubt about it.'

'Perhaps, when you have time, you will tell me the meaning of all this,' said the Countess, who seemed to think such animation on her son's part unnecessary and out of place.

'Certainly, mother; I will explain it to you at once. We yesterday made the acquaintance of a young lady, or, it would be more correct to say, *I* made her acquaintance, for Oswald, as usual, vouchsafed her little attention—I, however, as you may imagine, was gallant enough for both'—and so the young Count set about relating the adventure of the preceding day, going into all the details with much sparkling humour, and exulting in the fact of having so soon discovered his beautiful unknown. Nevertheless, he did not succeed in calling up a smile to his mother's face. She listened in silence, and when he wound up with an enthusiastic description of his heroine, she said very coolly and deliberately:

'You seem to look on this meeting in the light of a pleasurable occurrence. In your place I should have felt it to be a painful one. It is never agreeable to meet face to face persons with whom we are at strife.'

'At strife?' cried Edmund. 'I can never be at strife with a young lady of eighteen—certainly not with this one, though she should lay claim to Ettersberg itself. I would with pleasure lay Dornau

at her feet, could—'

'I beg you not to treat this matter with so much levity, Edmund,' interrupted the Countess. 'I know that you have a leaning to these follies, but when serious interests are at stake they must recede into the background. This affair is of a serious nature. Our opponents have imported into it a degree of bitterness, have acted with a churlish insolence, which makes any personal contact a thing absolutely to be deprecated. You will, I hope, see this yourself, and avoid any further meetings with firmness and consistency.'

With these lofty words she rose, and to leave no doubt in her son's mind as to the displeasure he had incurred, she left the room.

The young Master of Ettersberg, whose authority his mother was constantly asserting, seemed still docile to the maternal sceptre. He ventured no word of reply to her sharp remonstrance, though he might have urged that, after all, the lawsuit concerned no one but himself.

'That was to be expected,' remarked Oswald, as the door closed. 'Why did you not keep your supposition to yourself?'

'How was I to know that it would be so ungraciously received? There appears to be a deadly feud between this Rüstow and our family. No matter, that will not prevent my going over to Brunneck.'

Oswald looked up quickly from the papers he was turning over.

'You are not thinking of paying the Councillor a visit, are you?'

'Certainly I am. Do you think I mean to give up our charming acquaintance because our respective lawyers are wrangling over a cause which, in reality, is perfectly indifferent to me? On the contrary, I shall seize the opportunity of introducing myself to my lovely opponent as her adversary in the strife. I intend to go over very shortly, in the course of a few days.'

'The Councillor will soon show you the door,' said Oswald drily. 'He is known all over the country for his surly humour.'

'Well, that will only make me the more polite. I can take nothing amiss from the father of such a daughter, and I suppose even this bear will have some human points about him. What makes you look so solemn, Oswald? Are you jealous, old fellow? If so, you are free to ride over with me, and put your luck to the test.'

'Do not talk such nonsense to me,' said Oswald shortly, rising as he spoke, and going up to the window. The rapid movement and something in his tone told of a certain irritability with difficulty repressed.

'As you like; but I have one word more to say.' The young Count's face grew serious, and he cast a meaning glance in the direction of the adjoining room. 'Do not put forward your plans for the future just at present. We are not just now in a favourable humour to receive them. I wanted to take the lead, and make the inevitable disclosure easier to you, but I was met by such a hurricane that I wisely resolved not to acknowledge complicity

in the business.'

'Why should I put off an explanation? The subject must of necessity be broached shortly between my aunt and myself. I see no advantage in a delay.'

'Well, you can hold your tongue for a week at least,' cried Edmund testily. 'I have other things to think of just now, and no desire to be always on guard as a mediating angel between my mother and yourself.'

'Have I ever asked you to mediate?' said Oswald, in so sharp and uncourteous a tone that the young Count was roused to anger.

'Oswald, this is going a little too far. I am accustomed, it is true, to such rudeness on your part, but really I hardly see why I should take from my cousin what I would endure from no one else.'

'Because your cousin is a dependent, one inferior in the social scale, and you feel yourself called upon to show generosity towards—the poor relation.'

The words breathed of such infinite bitterness of spirit that Edmund's ill-humour vanished instantly.

'You are irritated,' he said kindly; 'and not without reason. But why do you visit your anger on me? I am in no way responsible for yesterday's incident. You know I cannot put myself in open opposition to my mother, even when my views differ decidedly from hers. But in this case she will give way, for if your own rooms next to mine are not made ready for you to-morrow, I shall remove to the side-wing and quarter myself upon you, spite of

bats and the accumulated dust of ages.'

The bitter expression vanished from Oswald's face, and he answered in a gentler voice:

'You are capable of it, I believe. But no more of this, Edmund. It really signifies little where I spend the few months of my sojourn here. The rooms in the tower are very quiet, and admirably suited for study. I would far rather be there than here, in this castle of yours.'

""This castle of yours,"" repeated Edmund, in a tone of pique. 'As though it had not always been as much your home as mine! But I believe you are seeking to estrange yourself from us. Oswald, I must say, if things are not always pleasant between my mother and you, a great share of the blame rests on your shoulders. You have never shown any affection for her, or any ready compliance with her wishes. Cannot you bring yourself to it, if you try?'

'I cannot comply where blind subjection is demanded of me, and where the whole future fortune of my life is at stake--no!'

'Well, then, we may expect another family quarrel at no very distant date,' said Edmund, evidently ill-pleased at the prospect. 'So you will not have any alteration made in the rooms?'

'No.'

'As you like. Goodbye.'

He walked off towards the door, but had not reached it when Oswald came quickly forth from the window-recess where he had been standing, and followed him.

'Edmund!'

'Well?' returned the other interrogatively, and halted.

'I shall remain where I am, in the side-wing, but— I thank you for your kindness.'

The young Count smiled.

'Really? That sounds almost like an apology. I really did not think you were capable of such expansiveness, Oswald;' and suddenly, with an impulse of frank, hearty affection, he threw his arm round his cousin's shoulder. 'Is it true that you cherish a hatred towards me, because Fate has willed that I should be heir to the property, because I stand between you and the Ettersberg estates?'

Oswald looked at him again with one of those strange, penetrating glances which seemed to be searching the young heir's features for something hidden from him. This time, however, the keen scrutiny soon gave place to an expression of warmer, deeper feeling, to a kindlier ray which beamed suddenly forth, melting the icy rampart of suspicion and reserve.

'It is not true, Edmund,' was the steady, grave reply.

'I knew it,' cried Edmund. 'And now we will bury all past misunderstandings. As regards our travelling acquaintance, however, I warn you that I shall summon up all my talent—and you know how justly it is esteemed—to produce an effect at Brunneck. This I shall do in spite of your frowning visage and of my mother's high displeasure. And I shall succeed in my endeavours, you may rely upon it.'

So saying, he caught hold of his cousin's arm, and drew him laughingly from the room.

CHAPTER III

Brunneck, the residence of Chief Councillor Rüstow, was situated only a few miles distant from Ettersberg, and had been in the hands of its present proprietor for a long series of years. It was a property of considerable extent and value, comprising various farms, and furnished with every improvement which modern science has devised. On all agricultural subjects the Councillor was looked upon as a first-class authority, and as, in addition to this, he owned one of the finest seigneurial manors of the province, his position was one of great influence. Brunneck could not, indeed, compare with the vast Ettersberg domain, but it was generally asserted that, in point of fortune, Rüstow was to the full as good a man as his noble neighbour. The numerous reforms he had introduced on his estates, and to the number of which he was with indefatigable energy constantly adding, had in the course of time become handsomely remunerative, and were now a source of wealth to him; whereas over at Ettersberg the management of the land was left almost entirely to underlings, and was conducted on so lofty and aristocratic a principle, that pecuniary interests were overlooked, and any tangible, practical return rendered out of the question.

As has already been stated, the two families were connected by marriage, but this circumstance was ignored on both sides with equal obstinacy and hostile feeling. In the position he now

occupied, the Councillor might more fitly have ventured to sue for the hand of a Fräulein von Ettersberg. Twenty years or more ago, the young gentleman-farmer who had come to Dornau to pick up some knowledge of his future vocation, and who had but a slender fortune to rely upon, was certainly no suitable *parti* for the daughter of the house. The young people fell in love, however, paying little heed either to prejudices or obstacles.

When their elders harshly interfered and separated them, when all resistance, all entreaties, failed to move them, Rüstow persuaded his betrothed, who meanwhile had come of age, to take a decisive step. She left her home clandestinely, and the marriage was celebrated, without her father's consent, it is true, but with all due formality. The young couple hoped that, this step being once irrevocably taken, forgiveness would follow, but this hope proved illusive. Neither the young wife's oft-repeated overtures, nor the birth of a grandchild, not even the rapidly ensuing change in Rüstow's circumstances—he achieved wealth and position in a marvellously short time—could appease the father's wrath. The old Count was too completely under the influence of his relations, who looked on the middle-class connection with horror and aversion, and used every means in their power to strengthen him in his hard resolve.

Frau Rüstow died without having obtained pardon, and at her death all chance of a reconciliation vanished. Her husband had, from the first, openly avowed his dislike to a family which had so cruelly wounded his pride and self-love. For his wife's sake alone

had he tolerated the former attempts at peacemaking; now that he had no longer her to consider, he assumed towards his father-in-law and the entire clan an attitude of hostility and surly defiance which precluded any intercourse. As a result of these tactics came the will which passed over the granddaughter, and, without even a mention of her or her mother assigned Dornau to the heir of the entailed family estates. This will was contested by Rüstow, who would not admit of his marriage being thus altogether ignored, and was determined to have his daughter acknowledged as her grandfather's legitimate successor and heiress. The suit had some base to rest upon, for the deceased had not disinherited his grandchild in so many words. He had contented himself with treating her as nonexistent, and had proceeded to dispose of his property in the manner which seemed to him good. This lapsus, and a few technical errors subsequently detected, rendered the will assailable. The issue was, however, most uncertain, and the lawyers on both sides had full opportunity of exercising their sagacity and judgment.

The Brunneck manor-house was neither so vast nor so imposing of aspect as Castle Ettersberg, yet it was a stately building, spacious, and bearing all the marks of age. The inner arrangements of the house, though boasting no pretence at luxury, were ordered on a scale suitable to the position and the fortune of the owner.

In the large veranda-parlour commonly used by the family, a lady was sitting, busy with household accounts. This was

an elderly relative of Rüstow's, who, on the death of that gentleman's wife, eight years previously, had come to preside over her cousin's establishment, and to act as a mother to his young daughter. She was bending over her books and making some memoranda when the door was hastily thrown open, and the Councillor himself appeared on the scene.

'I wish all the lawsuits and parchments, the courts and everything related to them, lawyers included, were at the deuce!' he cried, throwing to the door with a violent bang which made his cousin jump.

'Oh, Erich, how can you startle me so! You have been absolutely unbearable ever since that wretched suit was instituted. You seem to think of nothing else. Cannot you wait patiently until you see what the issue will be?'

'Patiently?' repeated Herr Rüstow, with a bitter laugh. 'I should like to see the man who would not lose his patience over it. They go on pulling this way and that, protesting against everything we do, lodging one appeal after another. Every letter of that blessed will has been discussed, evidence has been advanced, proofs have been furnished, and yet they are no forwarder than they were six months ago, not a whit!' And as he ended his tirade he threw himself into a chair.

Erich Rüstow was a man still in the prime of life, who, it was plain to see, had been handsome in his youth. Now his brow was furrowed and his face lined with the cares of a restless, busy life. He was, however, a stately, well-built person, whose appearance

would have been eminently agreeable, but for certain evidences of a hasty temper, prompt to break forth on every occasion; but for, so to say, a pugnacity of expression which considerably impaired his good looks.

'Where is Hedwig?' asked the master of the house, after a pause.

'She went out riding an hour ago,' replied her cousin, who had taken up her memoranda again.

'Went out riding? I told her not to ride to-day. This sudden thaw has made the roads impassable, and upon the hills the snow still lies deep.'

'No doubt, but you are aware that Hedwig generally does the thing she ought not to do.'

'Upon my soul, it is a strange fact, but I believe she does,' assented her father, who seemed to consider it merely a 'strange fact,' and not one calculated to excite his anger.

'You have let the girl grow up in too great freedom. How often have I entreated you to send Hedwig to a boarding-school for a few years; but no, nothing would induce you to part with her.'

'Because I did not want her to be estranged from me and from her home. I am sure I have had masters and governesses enough here at Brunneck, and she has learned pretty nearly everything under the sun.'

'True; one thing she has learned especially, and that is how to tyrannise over you and the entire household.'

'Don't go on preaching in that way, Lina,' said Rüstow angrily.

'You are always finding some fault with Hedwig. First she is thoughtless, then she is too superficial to please you, not deep, not "feeling" enough. I am satisfied with her as she is. I like my girl to be a bright, merry young thing, taking some pleasure in life, and not one of your sensitive, fashionable ladies with "feelings" and "nerves."'

As he spoke the last words, he cast a rather meaning glance at Fräulein Lina, who was quick to take up the gauntlet.

'One has to divest one's self of any such appurtenances here at Brunneck, I think. You take good care of that.'

'Well, I fancy the last eight years have done something for you in the way of getting rid of your nerves,' said Rüstow, with much apparent satisfaction. 'But the feelings are there still. How you felt for your *protégé*, Baron Senden, the other day, when Hedwig sent him to the rightabout!'

A pink flush of vexation mounted to the lady's cheek as she replied:

'Hedwig, at all events, showed little enough feeling in the matter. She merely ridiculed an offer which would, at least, have brought any other girl to a serious frame of mind. Poor Senden! He was in despair.'

'He will get over it,' observed Rüstow. 'In the first place, I believe that both his passion and his despair had my Brunneck, rather than my daughter, for their object. Her dowry would have come in nicely to rescue his estates, which are mortgaged over and over again; in the second place, it was his own fault that he

met with a refusal. A man should know how matters stand, before he proposes definitely; and thirdly, I should not have given my consent to the match under any circumstances, for I won't have Hedwig marrying into the aristocracy. I had too good experience of that with my own marriage. Of all the grand folk who come bothering us with their visits, not one shall have the girl—not one of them, I say. I will find a husband for her myself when the proper time comes.'

'And you really suppose that Hedwig will wait for that?' asked the lady, with gentle irony. 'Hitherto her suitors have all been indifferent to her. When she has an inclination towards anyone, she will certainly not stay to consider whether the gentleman belongs to the aristocracy, or whether she may not be acting contrary to her father's principles—and you, Erich, will submit, and do your darling's bidding in this, as in all else.'

'Lina, do you wish to exasperate me?' shouted Rüstow. 'You seem to think that where my daughter is concerned I can exercise no will of my own.'

'None at all,' she replied emphatically. Then she gathered together her papers and left the room.

The Master of Brunneck was furious, perhaps because he could not altogether dispute the truth of the assertion. He paced with rapid steps up and down the room, and turned wrathfully upon a servant who entered, bearing a card.

'What is it now? Another visit?'

Rüstow pulled the card out of the man's hand, but nearly let

it fall in his amazement as the name upon it met his eye.

'Edmund, Count von Ettersberg? What can be the meaning of this?'

'The Count desires the favour of an interview with Councillor Rüstow.'

The latter looked down at the card again. There, clear and distinct, stood the name of Ettersberg, and, inexplicable as the circumstance undoubtedly was, he had no choice but to admit the strange visitor.

Orders to this effect being given to the servant, the young Count promptly made his appearance, and greeted his neighbour, who yet was a perfect stranger to him, with as much ease and assurance as though this visit had been the most natural thing in the world.

'Councillor Rüstow, you will allow me to make the personal acquaintance of so near a neighbour as yourself. I should have endeavoured to do so long ago, but my studies and subsequent travels have kept me so much away from Ettersberg. I have only been home on flying visits, and this is my first opportunity of repairing previous shortcomings.'

At the first moment Rüstow was so staggered by this complete ignoring of the existing quarrel that he could not work himself up to anger. He grumbled something which sounded like an invitation to be seated. Edmund accordingly took a chair in the most unconcerned manner possible, and as his host showed no desire to open the conversation, he assumed the burden of it

himself, and launched into praises of the admirable system of management obtaining on the Brunneck estates, a system with which it had long been his wish to make himself acquainted.

Meanwhile Rüstow had minutely examined his visitor from head to foot, and had no doubt satisfied himself that the young gentleman's appearance did not tally with this pretended zealous interest in matters agricultural. He therefore broke in on Edmund's enthusiasm with the disconcerting question:

'May I ask, Count, to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit?'

Edmund saw that he must change his tactics. The mere easy jargon of politeness would not help him through. The Councillor's far-famed churlishness was already roused. A low growl, betokening a storm, might, as it were, be heard in the distance; but the young Count was well prepared for this, and was determined to remain master of the field.

'You will not accept me simply in my quality of neighbour?' he said, with an affable smile.

'You appear to forget that we are something else besides neighbours, namely, opponents in a court of justice,' retorted Rüstow, who began now to be angry in right earnest.

Edmund examined with attention the riding-whip he held in his hand.

'Oh, ah! You are alluding to that tiresome Dornau suit.'

'Tiresome? Wearisome, endless, you mean, for endless it would appear to be. You are as well acquainted with the

pleadings, I suppose, as I am.'

'I know nothing at all about them,' confessed Edmund, with great ingenuousness. 'I only know that there is a dispute about my uncle's will which assigns Dornau to me, but the validity of which you contest. Pleadings? I have had copies of all the documents, certainly, whole volumes of them, but I never looked over their contents.'

'But, Count, it is you who are carrying on this lawsuit!' cried Rüstow, to whom this placid indifference was something beyond belief.

'Pardon me, my lawyer is carrying it on,' corrected Edmund. 'He is of opinion that it is incumbent on me to uphold my uncle's will at any cost. I do not attach any such particular value to the possession of Dornau myself.'

'Do you suppose I do?' asked Rüstow sharply. 'My Brunneck is worth half a dozen such places, and my daughter has really no need to trouble herself about any inheritance from her grandfather.'

'Well, what are we fighting for, then? If the matter stands so, some compromise might surely be arrived at, some arrangement which would satisfy both parties—'

'I will hear of no compromise,' exclaimed the Councillor. 'To me it is not a question of money, but of principle, and I will fight it out to the last. If my father-in-law had chosen to disinherit us in so many words, well and good. We set him at defiance; he had the right to retaliate. I don't deny it. It is the fact of

his ignoring our marriage in that insulting manner, as though it had not been legally and duly celebrated—the fact of his passing over the child of the marriage, and declining to recognise her as his granddaughter—this is what I cannot forgive him, even in his grave, and this is what makes me determined to assert my right. The marriage shall be established, in the face of those who wish to repudiate it; my daughter shall be acknowledged as her grandfather's sole and legitimate heiress. Then, when the verdict of the court has once placed this beyond all doubt, Dornau and all belonging to it may go to the family estates, or to the devil, for what I care.'

'Ah, now we are getting rude,' thought Count Edmund, who had long been expecting some such outbreak, and who was highly amused by the whole affair.

He had come with the settled resolve to take nothing amiss from the Master of Brunneck, who was looked on as an original in his way, so he chose to view this tirade from its humorous side, and replied, with undiminished good-humour:

'Well, Councillor, the association is, I am sure, a very flattering one. It does not seem particularly probable that Dornau will lapse to the devil—whether it be adjudged to Brunneck or to Ettersberg, we must wait to see. But that is the court's business, and not ours. I frankly confess that I am curious to hear what all the wisdom of these learned counsel will ultimately bring forth.'

'I must say it has not occurred to me to look at the case in that light,' admitted Rüstow, whose amazement grew with every

minute.

'No, why not? You are contending, you say yourself, for a principle only. I am actuated by a pious regard for my relative's expressed wishes. We are most enviably placed, being simply objective in the matter. So, for heaven's sake, let the lawyers wrangle on. Their squabbles need not prevent our meeting as good neighbours on friendly terms.'

Rüstow was about to protest against the possibility of any friendly intercourse when the door opened, and his daughter appeared on the threshold. The young lady, whose cheeks were brightly tinted with the rapid exercise she had taken, looked even more charming to-day in her dark closely-fitting riding-habit than she had looked on a previous occasion when wrapped in furs and attired in winter clothing—so, at least, thought Count Edmund, who had sprung up with great alacrity, with more alacrity, indeed, than politeness called for, to greet her on her entrance. Hedwig had, no doubt, already heard from the servants who was with her father, for she betrayed no surprise, returning the Count's bow as formally as though he had been a complete stranger to her. The merry sparkle in her eye, however, told him that she had no more forgotten their first meeting than he himself. The Councillor, whether he liked it or not, was forced to condescend to an introduction; and the manner in which he pronounced the name of Ettersberg, a name heretofore prohibited in that house, proved that the bearer of it, despite the great prejudice against him, had already gained some ground.'

'Fräulein,' said Edmund, turning to the young lady, 'but the other day I learned whom Fate had assigned me as an opponent in the Dornau lawsuit. I therefore seize this, the first opportunity, to present myself in due form as your adversary in the strife.'

'And you have come to Brunneck to reconnoitre the enemy's territory, I suppose?' replied Hedwig, entering at once into the spirit of the joke.

'Certainly. It was my evident duty, under the circumstances. Your father has already pardoned this invasion of the hostile camp. I may trust for a like clemency from you, though you once showed yourself inexorable, refusing even to disclose your name.'

'What is all this?' broke in Rüstow. 'You have met the Count before to-day?'

'Yes, papa,' said Hedwig serenely. 'You know that when I was returning from the town the other day with the carriage and Anthony, we very nearly stuck in the snow, and I think I told you of the two gentlemen by whose assistance we managed to get home.'

A light appeared to dawn on the Councillor, revealing the source of this sudden and extreme friendliness on his young neighbour's part. He had hitherto racked his brains in vain to find a reason for it, and the discovery now made did not seem to afford him any particular satisfaction; the tone of his voice was exceedingly sharp as he replied:

'So it was Count Ettersberg, was it? Why did you conceal the name from me?'

Hedwig laughed: 'Because I knew your prejudice against it, papa. I believe if an avalanche had come down upon us and swallowed us up, your first feeling would have been one of anger at my being caught and buried in company of an Ettersberg.'

'Avalanches do not occur on our highroads,' growled Rüstow, to whom this merry humour did not commend itself.

'Well, Councillor, something of the sort seemed really to have taken place where the road descends into the valley,' joined in Edmund. 'I assure you, the journey was both difficult and dangerous. I esteem myself happy to have been able to offer your daughter my assistance.'

'Now, Count, you remained almost all the time on the carriage-step,' laughed Hedwig. 'It was your silent companion who really helped us in our need. He'—the question came rather hesitatingly—'he did not come over with you to-day, of course?'

'Oswald was not aware that I intended riding over to Brunneck this afternoon,' confessed Edmund. 'He will, I know, reproach me with having thus deprived him of the pleasure—'

'Oh, pray, do not trouble yourself to make pretty speeches,' interrupted the young lady, throwing back her head with an angry little toss, and looking as ungracious as possible—much as she had looked in the carriage on that previous occasion. 'I have had experience of your cousin's politeness, and, for my part, I certainly have no wish to renew the acquaintance.'

Edmund did not notice the pique expressed in these words. He thought it natural that the sombre, unsociable Oswald should

not be missed when he, Count Ettersberg, was present, and, moreover, using his best efforts to make himself agreeable. This he did with so much zeal and perseverance, that even Rüstow yielded to the charm. True, he struggled against it manfully, endeavouring by sundry barbed and sardonic remarks to impart a hostile tone to the conversation. But he was foiled at all points. His visitor's captivating manners and appearance won upon him more and more. The young Count was evidently bent on doing away with the prejudice which existed against him. He fascinated his hearers with his bright and sparkling talk, seducing them by its easy flow, and charming even by his saucy humour. The enemy, as personified in the master of the house, was overthrown and bound hand and foot before either side was well aware of the fact. Rüstow, at length, altogether forgot with whom he was dealing, and when after a protracted visit Edmund rose to go, his host actually accompanied him to the door, and even shook him cordially by the hand on parting.

It was only when the Councillor returned to the sitting-room that a full consciousness of what had occurred loomed upon him. Then his anger revived in full force. As he came in, Hedwig was standing out on the balcony, looking after the young Count, who turned and waved her an adieu as he galloped away. This gave the signal for the storm to break forth.

'Well, upon my word, this passes all belief! I don't know that I ever heard of such a piece of impudence! Count von Ettersberg to come riding over here, doing the agreeable, treating

the whole affair of the lawsuit as a mere bagatelle. He talked of a compromise, begged! of meeting on friendly terms, of the Lord knows what; fairly addling one, taking one's breath away with his audacity. But I will not put up with it a second time. If he really shows himself here again, I will have him told—politely, of course—that I am not at home.'

'You will do nothing of the kind, papa,' said Hedwig, who had gone up to him and laid her arm caressingly about his neck. 'You were too pleased with him yourself for that.'

'Ah, and you still more so, I suppose, my young lady?' said the father, with a highly critical, scrutinizing look. 'Do you imagine I can't guess what brought the young gentleman over to Brunneck? Do you think I did not see him kiss your hand as he took leave of you? But I will put a stop to this, once and for all. I will have nothing to do with any Ettersberg; I know the set by experience. Arrogance, selfishness, stupid obstinacy—those are the characteristics of the race. They are all alike, all cut out on the same pattern.'

'That is not true, papa,' said Hedwig decidedly. 'My mother was an Ettersberg, and you were very happy with her.'

The remark was so telling, that it quite disconcerted Rüstow.

'That—that was an exception,' he stammered at length.

'I believe Count Edmund is an exception too,' declared Hedwig confidently.

'Oh, you believe that, do you? You seem to have a great knowledge of character for a girl of eighteen,' cried the

Councillor, and forthwith delivered a lecture to his daughter, in which the before-mentioned 'principles' were much insisted on. Fräulein Hedwig listened with an expression of countenance which said plainly enough that the said 'principles' were highly indifferent to her, and if her father could have read her thoughts, he would again have had the 'strange fact' forced upon him that, on this occasion as on most others, she proposed to adopt a contrary course to that enjoined upon her.

CHAPTER IV

March and the greater part of April had gone by; snowstorms and sharp frosts were things of the past. Nevertheless, spring came but tardily. The country, which at this season of the year is usually decked in vernal bloom, looked bare and desolate. Warmth and sunshine were well-nigh unknown, and for weeks together the weather continued as ungenial as it well could be.

To all outward appearance, the hostile relations between Ettersberg and Brunneck remained unmodified. The lawsuit dragged its weary length along, both parties maintaining their original position, and no attempt at a compromise was, or seemed likely to be, made. The Countess furnished all instructions in her son's name, that young gentleman taking not the smallest interest in the affair; and the Councillor represented his daughter, a minor, who naturally could have no opinion in the matter.

It had been so from the beginning, therefore the delegation of authority was accepted as a thing of course.

But the principal persons concerned, the real opponents in this legal warfare, were by no means so passive as they appeared to be; and the parents, while pursuing their own determined course, upholding their 'principles' with the utmost persistency, little guessed what was preparing for them in secret.

Rüstow himself had been absent from Brunneck during the last few weeks. Some business connected with a great industrial

enterprise of which he was one of the promoters had called him to the capital. His counsel and aid were needed and sought in high quarters; unlooked-for delays occurred, and his stay, which was to have been a short one, had extended over an entire month.

When Count Ettersberg, after an interval of a week, repeated his visit to Brunneck, he found the master of the house absent. Fräulein Hedwig and her aunt were at home, however, and Edmund naturally made the most of his opportunity and ingratiated himself with the two ladies. This second visit was promptly succeeded by a third and a fourth; and from this time forward, by some remarkable accident, it invariably happened that when the ladies drove out, took a walk, or paid a visit in the neighbourhood, the young Count would be found at the same hour on the same road. By this fortunate chance, greetings were frequently exchanged, and meetings of varying duration occurred. In short, the friendly intercourse proposed some time before was thriving and prospering exceedingly.

The Councillor knew nothing of all this. His daughter did not consider it necessary to mention the matter in her letters, and Edmund pursued the same tactics with regard to his mother. To his cousin he had, indeed, imparted with triumphant glee the fact of that first invasion of the enemy's camp; but as Oswald made some rather sharp observations on the subject, describing any intercourse with Brunneck during the progress of the lawsuit as improper in the highest degree, no further communications were vouchsafed him.

On a rather cool and cloudy morning towards the end of April, Count Edmund and Oswald sallied out into the woods together. The Ettersberg forests were of great extent, stretching away to, and partly clothing, the low chain of hills which acted as advanced sentinels to the mountain-range beyond. The two gentlemen bent their steps in the direction of the rising ground. They had evidently something more than a pleasant walk in view, for they carefully surveyed the trees and the land as they advanced, and Oswald frequently addressed his cousin in terms of urgent appeal.

'Now just look at these woods! It really is astounding to see how things have been mismanaged here during the last few years. Why, they have cut down half your timber for you. I cannot understand how you were not at once struck by the fact yourself. You have been riding about all over the place nearly every day.'

'Oh, I did not think about it,' said Edmund. 'But you are right, it does look rather queer. The steward declares, I believe, that he had no other way of covering the deficit in the receipts.'

'The steward declares just what seems good to him, and as he stands high in favour with your mother, she accepts it all and gives him full tether, allowing him to act as he sees fit.'

'I will talk to my mother about it,' declared the young Count. 'It would be a great deal better, though, if you would do it yourself. You can explain these matters much more clearly and cogently than I can.'

'You know that I never offer advice to your mother on

any subject. She would consider it an unjustifiable piece of impertinence on my part, and would reject it accordingly.'

Edmund made no reply to this last observation, the truth of which he no doubt recognised.

'Are you of opinion that the steward is dealing unfairly by us?' he asked, after a short pause.

'Not that precisely, but I consider him to be incompetent, wholly unfitted for the position of trust he occupies. He has no initiative, no method or power of keeping things together. As it is with the forests, so is it with all under his rule. Each man on the place does what seemeth best in his own eyes. If matters are allowed to go on in this way, I tell you they will absolutely ruin your property. Look at Brunneck; see the order that reigns there. Councillor Rüstow draws as much from that one estate as you from the whole Ettersberg domain, though the resources here are incomparably greater. Hitherto you have had to confide in others. You have been absent for years, first at the University, then abroad; but now you are on the spot—you are here expressly to look after your property for yourself. Energetic measures must at once be taken.'

'Good heavens! what discoveries you have made during the six weeks we have spent at home!' said Edmund, in a tone of sincere admiration. 'If it is all as you say, I certainly shall have to take some steps; but I'll be hanged if I know how I ought to begin!'

'First of all, dismiss those employés who have proved themselves incapable; put men of more power and intelligence in

their place. I almost fear that you will have to change the entire staff.'

'Not for the world! Why, that would give rise to perplexities and disagreeables without end. It is painful to me to see all new faces about me, and it would take months before they settled down into harness, and got used to their work. Meanwhile, all the burden would fall upon me. I should have to do everything myself.'

'That is what you are master for. You can at least command those beneath you.'

Edmund laughed.

'Ah, if I had your special liking and talent for command! In a month you would have metamorphosed Ettersberg, and in three years you would make of it a model establishment after the pattern of Brunneck. Now, if you were going to stay by me, Oswald, it would be different. I should have some one to back and support me then; but you are determined to go away in the autumn, and here shall I be all alone with unreliable or strange new servants to deal with. Pretty prospect, I must say! I have not formally taken possession yet, and the whole concern has become a worry to me already.'

'As Fate has willed that you should be heir to the estates, you must perforce bear the heavy burden laid upon you,' said Oswald sarcastically. 'But once more, Edmund, it is high time something should be done. Promise me that you will proceed to action without delay.'

'Certainly, certainly,' assented the young Count, who had visibly had enough of the subject. 'As soon as I can find time—just now I have so many other things to think of.'

'Things of more importance than the welfare of your estates?'

'Possibly. But I must be off now. Are you going straight back home?'

The question was a particularly pointed one. Oswald did not notice this; he had turned away in evident displeasure.

'Certainly. Are not you coming with me?'

'No, I am going over to the lodge. The forester has my Diana in training, and I must go over and have a look at her.'

'Must your visit be made now?' asked Oswald, in surprise. 'You know that the lawyer is coming over from town at twelve o'clock to-day, to hold a conference with you and your mother on the subject of the lawsuit, and that you have promised to be punctual?'

'Oh! I shall be back long before then,' said Edmund lightly. 'Good bye for the present, Oswald. Don't look so black at me. I give you my word that I will have a thorough good talk with the steward to-morrow, or the day after. Any way, I will have it out with him, you may depend upon it.'

So saying, he struck into a side-path, and soon disappeared among the trees.

Oswald looked after him with a frowning brow.

'Neither to-morrow, nor the next day, nor, in fact, ever, will a change be made. He has some fresh folly in his head, and

Ettersberg may go to the dogs for anything he cares. But, after all—and an expression of profound bitterness flitted like a spasm across the young man's face—'after all, what is it to me? I am but a stranger on this soil, and shall always remain so. If Edmund will not listen to reason, he must take the consequences. I will trouble myself no further about the matter.'

But this was more easily said than done; Oswald's gaze constantly wandered back to the mutilated forest, where such cruel gaps were to be seen. His anger and indignation at the senseless, purposeless work of devastation he beheld on all sides grew too strong to be subdued, and instead of returning home, as he had intended, he continued on his way uphill, to inspect the state of the woods on the higher ground. What he there saw was not of a consoling nature. Everywhere the axe had been at its work of destruction, and not until he reached the summit could a change be noted. Here, on the heights, began the Brunneck territory, where a different and a better order of things prevailed.

A wish to draw a comparison first drew Oswald on to the neighbour's land, but his anger swelled high within him as he paced on through the noble woods and carefully preserved plantations, with which, in their present maimed condition, the Ettersberg forests could certainly not compare. What a great work the energy and activity of one man had effected here at Brunneck, and how, on the other hand, had Ettersberg fallen! Since the old Count's death, the care of the estates had been left almost entirely in the hands of employés. The Countess,

an exalted lady who from the day of her marriage had known nothing, seen nothing but wealth and splendour, considered it a matter of course that the administration of affairs should be conducted by subordinates, and that the family should be troubled on such subjects as little as possible. Moreover, the establishment was kept up on a costly footing; the sums for its maintenance had to be found, and, of course, the estates must be made to provide them—it signified little how. The Countess's brother, Edmund's guardian, lived in the capital. He filled a high office under the State, and was much taken up by the duties and claims of his position. He interfered but rarely; never except in special cases when his sister desired his counsel and assistance. Her husband's testamentary arrangements had vested all real authority in her. There would, of course, be an end to all this now that Edmund was of age; but proof had just been forthcoming of what might be expected from the young heir's energy and concern for the welfare of his estates. Oswald told himself, with bitter vexation of spirit, that he should see one of the finest properties of the country drift on to certain ruin, owing entirely to the heedlessness and indifference of its owner; and the thought was the more galling to him that he felt assured a swift and energetic course of action might still repair the mischief that had been done. There was yet time. Two short years hence it might possibly be too late.

Absorbed by these reflections, the young man had plunged deeper and deeper into the woods. Presently he stopped and

looked at his watch. More than an hour had passed since he had parted with Edmund—the young Count must long ere this have turned his face homewards. Oswald determined that he also would go back, but for his return he chose another and a somewhat longer route. No duty called him home. His presence at the conference to be held that day was neither necessary nor desired. He was therefore free to extend his walk according to his fancy.

Those must have been singular meditations which occupied the young man's mind as he paced slowly on. The forests and the steward's mismanagement had long ago passed from his thoughts. It was some other hidden trouble which knit his brow with that menacing frown, and lent to his face that harsh, implacable expression—an expression that seemed to say he was ready to do battle with the whole world. Dark and troubled musings were they, revolving incessantly about one haunting subject from which he strove in vain to tear himself free, but which, nevertheless, held him more and more captive.

'I will not think of it any more,' he said at length, half aloud. 'It is always the same thing, always the old wretched suspicion which I cannot put from me. I have nothing—absolutely nothing to confirm it, or to base it upon, and yet it embitters my every hour, poisons every thought—away with it!'

He passed his hand across his brow, as though to scare away all tormenting fancies, and walked on more quickly along the road, which now took a sharp turn and suddenly emerged from

the forest. Oswald stepped out on to an open hill-summit, but stopped suddenly, rooted to the ground in astonishment at the unlooked-for spectacle which presented itself.

Not twenty paces from him, on the grassy slope close to the border of the forest, a young lady was seated. She had taken off her hat, so a full view of her face could be obtained—and he who had once looked on that charming face, with its dark beaming eyes so full of light, could not readily forget it.

The young lady was Hedwig Rüstow, and close by her, in most suggestive proximity, lounged Count Edmund, who certainly could not have paid his visit to the forester in the interval. The two were engaged in an animated conversation, which did not, however, appear to turn on serious or very important topics. It was rather the old war of repartee which they had waged with so much satisfaction to themselves on the occasion of their first meeting, the same exchange of banter, of merry jests accompanied by gleeful laughter; but to-day their manner told of much familiarity. Presently Edmund took the hat from the girl's hand and threw it on to the grass; after which, lifting the little palms to his lips, he imprinted on them one fervid kiss after the other, Hedwig offering no opposition, but accepting it all as the most natural thing in the world.

For some moments the amazed spectator stood motionless, watching the pair. Then he turned and would have stepped back among the trees unnoticed, but a dry bough crackled beneath his feet and betrayed him.

Hedwig and Edmund looked up simultaneously, and the latter sprang quickly to his feet.

'Oswald!'

His cousin saw that a retreat was now impossible. He therefore reluctantly left his position and advanced towards the young people.

'So it is you, is it?' said Edmund, in a tone which vacillated between annoyance and embarrassment. 'Where do you come from?'

'From the woods,' was the laconic reply.

'I thought you said you were going straight home.'

'I thought you were going over to the forester's lodge, which lies in the opposite direction.'

The young Count bit his lips. He was, no doubt, conscious that he could not pass off this meeting as an accidental one. Moreover, those fervent kisses must have been witnessed—so he resolved to put as good a face upon it as possible.

'You know Fräulein Rüstow, having been present at our first meeting; I therefore need not introduce you,' he said lightly.

Oswald bowed to the young lady with all a stranger's frigid courtesy.

'I must apologize for intruding,' he said. 'The interruption was most involuntary on my part. I could have no idea that my cousin was here. Allow me to take my leave at once, Fräulein.'

Hedwig had risen in her turn. She evidently was more keenly alive to the awkwardness of the situation than Edmund, for her

cheeks were suffused by a flaming blush, and her eyes sought the ground. Something, however, in the tone of this address, which, though polite, was icy in its reserve, struck her disagreeably, and she looked up. Her glance met Oswald's, and there must have been that in the expression of his face which wounded her and called her pride into arms; for suddenly the dark blue eyes kindled with indignant fire, and the voice, which so lately had rung out in merry jest and silver-clear laughter, shook with emotion and anger as she cried:

'Herr von Ettersberg, I beg of you to remain.'

Oswald, on the point of departure, halted. Hedwig went up to the young Count, and laid her hand on his.

'Edmund, you will not let your cousin go from us in this manner. You will give him the necessary explanation—immediately, on the spot. You must see that he—that he misunderstands.'

Oswald, involuntarily, had drawn back a step, as the familiar 'Edmund' met his ears. The Count himself seemed somewhat taken aback by the determined, almost authoritative tone which he now heard probably for the first time from those lips.

'Why, Hedwig, it was you yourself who imposed silence on me,' he said. 'Otherwise I should certainly not have kept the fact of our attachment secret from Oswald. You are right. We must take him into our confidence now. My severe Mentor is capable else of preaching us both a long sermon, setting forth our iniquity. We will therefore go through the introduction in

due form. Oswald, you see before you my affianced wife and your future relation, whom I herewith commend to your cousinly esteem and affection.'

This introduction, though decidedly meant in earnest, was performed in the Count's old light, jesting tone; but the gay humour, which Hedwig was usually so prompt to echo, seemed to jar upon her now almost painfully. She stood quite silent by her lover's side, watching with strange intensity the new relative opposite, who was mute as herself.

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