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SAINT MICHAEL

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Содержание

SAINT MICHAEL	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

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Saint Michael: A Romance

SAINT MICHAEL

Easter had come; the season of light and refreshment for universal nature! Winter, as he departed, had shrouded himself in a veil of gloomy mist, and spring followed close after fleeing abysmal clouds. She had sent forth the blasts, her messengers, to arouse the earth from its slumber; they roared above meadow and plain, waved their wings around the mighty summits of the mountain ranges, and stirred the sea to its depths. There was a savage conflict and turmoil in the air, whence issued, nevertheless, a note as of victory. The blasts were those of spring, and were instinct with life,—they heralded a resurrection.

The mountains were still half buried in snow, and the ancient stronghold that looked down from their heights upon the valley towered above snow-laden pines. It was one of those gray, rock-crowning castles that were formerly the terror of the surrounding country, and are now for the most part deserted and forgotten, with naught but ruins to tell of ancient splendour. This, however, was not the case in this instance: the Counts von Steinrück carefully preserved the cradle of their race from decay, although otherwise they cared very little for the old pile, secluded as it was from the world in the depths of the mountains. In the hunting season only, when there was usually an arrival of guests, life and bustle awoke the echoes within its ancient walls.

This year was an exceptional one, however. Guests, it is true, were assembled here in the early spring, but upon a very solemn occasion. The castle's lord was to be borne to the grave, and with him the younger branch of the family was extinct in the male succession, for he left behind him only his widow and a little daughter. Count Steinrück had died at one of his other estates, his usual dwelling-place, and there the grand obsequies had been held, before the corpse had been brought hither to be interred in the family vault very quietly and in presence of none save the nearest of kin.

It was one of those stormy days in March when the entire valley is filled with masses of gray clouds. The dim afternoon light penetrated to the apartment which the dead Count had been wont to occupy during his short autumnal visits to the castle. It was a long, rather low room, with a single large bow-window, and its arrangement dated from the time of the castle's magnificence. The dark wainscoting, the huge oaken doors, and the gigantic chimney-piece supporting the Steinrück escutcheon, and sustained by pillars, had remained unchanged for centuries, while the heavy antique furniture, and the old family portraits on the walls, alike belonged to a long-vanished period of time. The fire smouldering on the hearth could scarcely give an air of comfort to the gloomy room, which, nevertheless, represented a bit of history,—the history of an influential family whose fortunes had long been closely allied with those of its country.

The door opened, and two gentlemen entered, evidently relatives of the house, for the uniform of the one and the civilian's dress of the other showed each conventional signs of mourning. In fact, they had just returned from the funeral, and the face of the elder man had not yet lost the solemnity of expression befitting the occasion.

"The will is to be opened to-morrow," he said, "but it will be a mere form, as I am perfectly aware of its dispositions. To the Countess is left a large income with Castle Berkheim, where she has always resided; all the other estates go to Hertha, whose guardian I am to be. Then come a series of legacies, and Steinrück is bequeathed to me as the head of the elder branch."

At the last words the younger man shrugged his shoulders. "That child inherits an enormous property," he said. "Your inheritance is not exactly brilliant, papa; I imagine this old castle with the forests belonging to it costs almost as much as it yields."

"No matter for that; it is the ancestral stronghold of our family which thus comes into our possession. My cousin could have left me nothing more valuable, and I am duly grateful to him. Shall you return tomorrow, Albrecht?"

"I had arranged to stay from home for a few days only, but if you desire—"

"No, there is no necessity for your staying. I shall, of course, apply for an extension of my leave. There is much to be attended to, and the Countess seems so entirely dependent that I shall be compelled to stay and assist her for a while."

He went to the bow-window and looked out upon the veiled landscape. The Count had already passed the prime of life, but there was about him no sign of failing vigour; his figure was fine, his carriage commanding. He must have once been extremely handsome, and, indeed, might still have been called so even at his age; his abundant, slightly-grizzled hair, his quick, energetic movements, and his full, deep voice, as well as the fire of his eye, gave him a decided air of youth.

His son was his opposite in all these characteristics; his figure was slender, and he looked delicate in health. His pale face and thin features gave the impression of timidity, and yet those features certainly resembled his father's. Striking as was the contrast they presented, the family likeness between father and son was unmistakable.

"The Countess seems to be an utterly dependent creature," he said; "this trial finds her perfectly helpless."

"It is very hard for her, losing her husband thus after so short an illness and in the prime of life,—sensitive natures are sure to be crushed by such a blow."

"Still, some women would have borne it better. Louise would have resigned herself with fortitude to the inevitable."

"Hush, hush!" the Count interrupted him sternly as he turned away.

"Forgive me, sir; I know you do not like to be reminded, but to-day such reminiscences will thrust themselves before me. Of right Louise should now be the mourner here. She would hardly have been left with only a large income. Steinrück would have made her sole mistress of all that he possessed; he used to submit to her in everything. How, how could she reject him? And to sacrifice everything, name, home, family, to become the wife of an adventurer who dragged her down to ruin! It is enough to revive faith in the old legends of love-philtres; such things can hardly be accounted for by natural means."

"Folly!" the Count said, coldly. "Our fate lies in our own hands. Louise turned aside to an abyss, and it engulfed her."

"And yet you might, perhaps, have received the outcast again if she had returned repentant."

"Never!" The word was uttered with uncompromising severity. "And, besides, she never would have returned. She could go to destruction in the disgrace and misery which she had brought upon herself, but Louise never could have pleaded for mercy with the father who had thrust her forth. She was my own child, in spite of all!"

"And your favourite," Albrecht concluded, with an outbreak of bitterness. "I know it well; I have been told often enough that in no quality do I resemble you. Louise alone inherited your characteristics. Beautiful, intellectual, energetic, she was the child of your affections, your pride, your delight. Well, we have lived to see whither this energy led; we know how, at that man's side, she sank lower and lower, until at last—"

"Your sister is dead," the Count interrupted him, sternly. "Let the dead rest!"

Albrecht was silent, but the bitterness did not pass from his look; he evidently could not forgive his sister for what she had brought upon her family. There was no further conversation, however, for a servant appeared and announced "His reverence the pastor of Saint Michael."

This arrival seemed to have been expected, for the servant, without awaiting permission, ushered in the priest.

He was a man about fifty years of age, with perfectly gray hair, a face expressing grave serenity, and dark-blue eyes, while his carriage and manner bespoke the repose and gentleness befitting his calling.

Count Steinrück advanced several steps to receive him, and greeted him courteously but formally. The elder branch of the family was Protestant, and as such had no especial consideration for a Catholic priest. "I desire to express my thanks to your reverence," he began, motioning the pastor to a seat. "It was the special wish of the widowed Countess that you should conduct the funeral services, and on this mournful day you have given her such loyal support that we are all grateful to you."

"I only fulfilled my duty as a pastor," the ecclesiastic replied, calmly, "and deserve no gratitude. But I come to you now, Count, to make an appeal upon another subject, where my interference is uncalled for and perhaps, in your eyes, unjustifiable; yet, since the late melancholy event has brought you unexpectedly to our mountains, I could not but request this interview with you."

"Let me repeat that I am at your service, Herr Pastor Valentin. If the matter is of a private nature, my son will leave—"

"I pray the Count to remain," Valentin interposed. "He is aware of the matter that brings me hither; it concerns the foster-son of the forester Wolfram."

He paused as if awaiting an answer, but none was forthcoming. The Count sat still, with an unmoved countenance, and Albrecht, although he suddenly became attentive, was silent; therefore the priest was compelled to proceed.

"You will remember, Herr Count, that it was through me that you received intelligence of the boy's place of abode, coupled with the request that you would befriend him."

"A request with which I immediately complied Wolfram took charge of the child by my desire, as I informed you."

"True; I should indeed have much preferred to see the child in other hands, although such was your disposition of him. Now, however, the boy has grown older, and cannot possibly be left among such surroundings. I am convinced that you could not desire it."

"And why not?" rejoined Steinrück, coldly. "I know Wolfram to be thoroughly trustworthy, and I had my reasons for choosing him. Do you know anything to his discredit?"

"No; the man is honest, after his fashion, but rude and half savage in his solitude. Since his wife's death he scarcely comes in contact with mankind, and his household differs in no wise from that of a common peasant. Such a one can scarcely be a good home for a growing boy, least of all for the grandson of Count Steinrück."

Albrecht, standing behind his father's chair, stirred uneasily; the old Count frowned, and rejoined, sharply, "I have but one grandchild, my son's boy, and I pray your reverence to keep this fact in mind in your allusion to the matter under discussion."

The priest's gentle gaze fell grave and reproachful upon the speaker. "Pardon me, Herr Count, but your daughter's legitimate child has a just claim to be entitled your grandson."

"Nevertheless he is not such; that marriage had no existence for me or for my family."

"And yet you acceded to my request when Michael—"

The Count started. "Michael?" he repeated, slowly.

"The boy's name. Did you not know it?"

"No; I did not see the child when it was given to Wolfram to educate."

"There could be no question of education with a man of Wolfram's lack of culture, and yet much might have been effected by it. Michael had been neglected and allowed to run wild in the uncertain life led by his parents. I have done what I could for him, and have given him all the instruction that I could, considering the seclusion of the forester's lodge."

"Have you really done this?" There was displeased surprise in the tone of the question.

"Certainly; no other instruction was possible in that seclusion, and I could not for a moment suppose that the boy was to be intentionally degraded and intellectually starved in that solitude. Such a punishment for his parent's fault would have been too hard."

There was stern reproof in the simple words, and they must have hit the mark, for an angry gleam flashed in Steinrück's eyes. "Whatever your reverence may have learned of our family affairs, your judgment with regard to them must be that of a stranger, and as such some things may seem incomprehensible to you. It is my duty, as the head of the family, to preserve its honour intact, and whoever assails and attaints that honour will be thrust forth from my heart and home, though such assault proceed from my own child. I did what I was forced to do, and in case of a like terrible necessity I should act similarly."

The words were uttered with iron determination, and Valentin was silent for a moment, probably feeling that no priestly admonition could affect such a nature. "The Countess Louise has found rest in the grave," he said at last, and his voice trembled slightly as he uttered the name, "and with her also the man to whom she was wedded. Her son is alone and unprotected, and I come to ask for the boy what you would not refuse to any orphaned stranger commended to your care,—an education which will enable him in future to confront life and the world. If he remains in Wolfram's charge he is entirely excluded from anything of the kind, and will be condemned to a half-savage existence in some lonely mountain forest lodge, a life no higher in aim than that of the merest peasant. If you, Herr Count, can answer to yourself for this—"

"Enough!" the Count angrily interrupted him, rising from his chair. "I will take the matter into consideration and decide definitively with regard to your *protégé*. Upon this your reverence may rely."

The pastor arose on the instant; he perceived that the interview was at an end, and he had no desire to prolong it. "My *protégé*?" he repeated; "may he be yours also, Herr Count,—he surely has a right to be so." And with a brief, grave inclination of his head to each of the gentlemen, he left the room.

"A most extraordinary visit!" said Albrecht, who had hitherto been silent. "What right has this priest to meddle in our family affairs?"

Steinrück shrugged his shoulders. "He was formerly our cousin's father confessor, and now occupies a confidential position with his family, although he lives high up in a lonely Alpine village. He and no other must attend Steinrück's body to the grave. I shall make him understand, however, that I am inaccessible to priestly influence. I could not quite deny myself to him, since it was he who some time ago asked my aid for the orphan boy, any more than I could refuse the aid he asked."

"Yes, the boy had to be cared for, and it has been done," Albrecht coolly assented. "You attended to the matter yourself, sir. This Wolfram—I have an indistinct remembrance of the name—was once a gamekeeper of yours, was he not?"

"Yes; my recommendation procured him his position as forester with my cousin. He is taciturn and trustworthy, troubling himself little concerning matters beyond his ken. He never asked what my relations with the boy intrusted to him were, but did as he was bidden, and took him home."

"Where he belongs, of course. You do not contemplate making any change?"

"That remains to be decided. I must see him."

Albrecht started, and his features betrayed surprise and annoyance. "Wherefore? Why have any personal contact with him? One keeps as far as possible out of the way of such disagreeable matters."

"That is your fashion," the Count said, sharply. "Mine is to confront such evils, and contend with them, if necessary, face to face." He stamped his foot in a sudden outburst of anger. "'*Intentionally degraded and intellectually starved as a punishment for his parent's fault!*' That this priest should say it to my face!"

"Yes, it only remained for him to undertake the defence of the parents," Albrecht interposed, disdainfully. "And they called their boy Michael. They presumed to give him your name,—the ancient traditional name of our family. The insult is apparent."

"It may have been the result of repentance," Steinrück said, gloomily. "Your son is called Raoul."

"Not at all; he was christened by your name, which he bears."

"In the church register! He is called Raoul; your wife has seen to that."

"It is the name of Hortense's father, and she clings to it with filial devotion. You know this, and you have never found any fault with it."

"If it were the name alone! But it is not the only thing foreign to me in my grandson. There is no trace of the Steinrück in Raoul, either in face or in character; he resembles his mother."

"I should not reckon that against him. Hortense has always been considered a beauty. You have no idea how many conquests she still makes."

The words were uttered in seeming jest, but they met with no response in the manner of the old Count, who remained grave and cold. "That probably accounts for her attachment to the scene of such triumphs. You spend more time in France with her relatives than you do at home. Your visits there are more frequent and more prolonged as time goes on, and there is some talk now, I hear, of your being attached to our embassy in Paris. Then Hortense will have attained her desire."

"I must go wherever I am sent," Albrecht said in self-exculpation, "and if they select me—"

"What? playing your diplomatic game with me?" his father interrupted him harshly. "I know well enough what secret wires are pulled, and the position is but an insignificant one. I expected better things of your career, Albrecht. There were paths enough open to you whereby to attain eminence, but to do so needed ambition and energy, neither of which qualities have you ever possessed. Now you are applying for a position which you will owe entirely to your name, and which you may occupy for a decade without advancing a step,—and all in obedience to the wishes of your wife."

Albrecht bit his lip at this reproof, uttered as it was with almost brutal frankness.

"In this respect, papa, you have always been unjust; you never regarded my marriage with any favour. I thought myself secure of your approval of my choice, and you have all but reproached me for bringing home to you a beautiful, talented daughter from one of the most distinguished—"

"Who has never been other than a stranger to us," Steinrück interrupted his son. "She has never yet perceived that she belongs to us, not you to her. I could wish you had brought home to me the daughter of the simplest country nobleman instead of this Hortense de Montigny. It is not good, the mixture of hot French blood in our ancient German race, and Raoul shows far too much of it. Stern military discipline will be of use to him."

"Yes,—you insist that he shall enter the army," said Albrecht, with hesitation. "Hortense is afraid—and I fear also—that our child is not equal to much hardship. He is a delicate boy; he will not be able to endure such iron discipline."

"He must learn to endure it. Your delicate health has always excluded you from the service; but Raoul is healthy, and it is high time to withdraw him from the effeminating effect of pampering and petting. The army is the best school for him. My grandson must not be a weakling; he must do honour to our name; I'll take care of that."

Albrecht was silent; he knew his father's inflexible will. It still gave him the law, husband and father though he were, and Count Michael Steinrück was the man to see that his laws were obeyed.

"I can't help it, your reverence; the fellow is a trial. He knows nothing, he understands nothing; he wanders about the mountains from morning to night, and grows stupider every day. He'll never make a decent forester; 'tis all trouble lost."

The words were spoken by a man whose appearance betrayed his forester's calling. He was provided with gun and hunting-pouch, and was sturdy and powerful of frame, with broad shoulders and coarse features. His hair and beard were neglected, his dress—a mixture of hunting and peasant's costume—was careless in the extreme, and his speech was as rude as his exterior; thus he confronted the priest. The pair were in the parsonage of Saint Michael, a small hamlet high up among the mountains, and a place of pilgrimage. The priest, seated at his writing-table, shook his gray head disapprovingly.

"As I have often told you, Wolfram, you do not understand how to treat Michael. You can never do anything with him by threats and abuse; you only make him shyer, and he is already shy enough in his intercourse with human kind."

"That all comes from his stupidity," the forester explained. "The boy does not see daylight clearly; he has to be shaken hard to rouse him, since I made your reverence a promise not to beat him again."

"And I hope you have kept your word. The child has been much sinned against; you and your wife maltreated him daily before I came here."

"It did him good. All boys need the stick, and Michael always needed a double portion. Well, he got it. When I stopped, my wife began; but it never did any good,—it never made him any the cleverer."

"No; but he would have been ruined by your rough treatment if I had not interfered."

Wolfram laughed aloud. "Ruined? Michael? Not a bit of it. He could have borne ten times as much; he's as strong as a bear. It's a perfect shame; the fellow could tear up trees by the roots, and he lets himself be teased by the village children without ever stirring a finger. I know right well why he wouldn't come along with me to-day, but chose to follow me. He won't come through the village; he chooses to come the longer way, through the forest, as he always does when he comes to you, the cowardly fellow!"

"Michael is no coward," said the pastor, gravely. "You ought to know that, Wolfram; you have told me yourself that there is no controlling him when he once gets angry."

"Yes, he's right crazy then, and must be let alone. If I didn't know that he's not all right here"—he touched his forehead—"I'd take him in hand, but it's a terrible cross. It's strange, too, that he shoots so well, when he sees the game, though that's not often. He stares up into the trees and the sky, and a stag will run away right under his nose. I'm not curious, but, indeed, I'd like to know where the moon-calf comes from."

Valentin looked pained at these words, but he replied, calmly, "That can hardly interest you. Do not put such ideas into Michael's head, or he might ask you questions which you cannot answer."

"He's too stupid for that," asserted the forester, with whom his foster-son's stupidity seemed to be an indisputable article of faith. "I don't believe he knows that he was ever even born. But Tyras is barking,—he must see Michael."

In fact, the dog was barking joyously, the sound of approaching footsteps was heard, and in the next instant Michael entered the room.

The new-comer was a lad of about eighteen, but his tall, powerful figure, with its awkward movements, showed nothing of the grace and freshness of youth. The face, plain and irregular in all its lines, had a half-shy, half-dreamy expression that was hardly attractive. The thick, fair curls were matted around the temples and brow, below which looked out a pair of eyes deep blue in colour, but as vacant as if no soul enlightened their depths. His dress was as sordid and neglected as the forester's, and in his entire appearance there was absolutely nothing to attract.

"Well, have you come at last?" was his foster-father's gruff reception of him. "You must have gone to sleep on the way, or you would have been here long ago."

"I came through the forest," replied Michael, going up to the priest, who kindly held out his hand to him.

Wolfram laughed scornfully. "Didn't I tell your reverence? He didn't dare to go through the village,—I knew it."

Michael paid not the slightest heed to the apparently well-grounded accusation, being well used to such treatment from his foster-father, who now took his hat and made ready to go.

"I must go up to the fenced forest," he said; "it looks badly there: more than a dozen of the tallest trees are torn down; the Wild Huntsman has made terrible work there lately."

"You mean the storms of the last week, Wolfram?"

"No, it was the Wild Huntsman, your reverence. He is abroad every night this spring. The day before yesterday, as we came through the wood at dusk, the whole mad crew swept by not a hundred yards away. They raged and howled and stormed as though all hell had broken loose, and I suppose a bit of it had done so. Michael, stupid fool, would have rushed into the thick of it, but I caught his arm in time and held him fast."

"I wanted to see the demon at close quarters," said Michael, quietly.

The forester shrugged his shoulders. "There, your reverence, you see what the fellow is! He runs away from human creatures and such like, but he wants to be right in the midst of things which make every Christian shudder, and cross himself! I really believe he would have joined the phantoms if I had not held him back, and then he would now have been lying dead in the forest, for he who joins the Wild Huntsman's chase is lost."

"Will you never be rid of this sinful superstition, Wolfram?" said the priest. "You pretend to be a Christian, and are nothing better than a heathen. And you have infected Michael, too; his head is full of heathenish legends."

"It may be sinful, but it's true for all that," Wolfram insisted. "I don't suppose you see anything of it. You are a holy man, a consecrated priest, and the ghostly rabble that haunt the forest at night is afraid of you, but the like of us see and hear more of it than is agreeable. Then Michael is to stay here?"

"Of course. I will send him back in the afternoon."

"Good—by, then," said the forester, tightening the strap of his gun. He bowed to the priest, and departed without taking further notice of his foster-son.

Michael, who seemed to be perfectly at home in the parsonage, now fetched various books and papers from a cupboard and arranged them on the writing-table. Evidently the wonted instruction was about to begin, but before it could do so the sound of a sleigh was heard outside. Valentin looked up in surprise; the rare visits that he received were almost exclusively from the pastors of secluded Alpine villages, and pilgrims were scarcely to be looked for at this time of year. Saint Michael was not one of those large and famous places of pilgrimage whither the faithful resort in crowds at all seasons. Only the poor dwellers on the Alps brought their vows and supplications to the secluded hamlet, and only upon church festivals was there any great gathering there.

Meanwhile, the sleigh had drawn up before the parsonage. A gentleman in a fur coat got out, inquired of the maid who met him at the door whether the Herr Pastor was at home, and forthwith made his way to the study.

Valentin started at the sound of the voice, and then rose with delighted surprise in every feature. "Hans! Is it you?"

"You know me still, then? It would be no wonder if each of us failed to recognize the other," said the stranger, offering his hand, which was warmly grasped by the priest.

"Welcome, welcome! Have you really found me out?"

"Yes, it certainly was a proof of affection, the getting up to you here," said the guest. "We have been working our way for hours through the snow; sometimes fallen hemlocks lay directly across the road, sometimes we had to cross a mountain torrent, and for a change we had small avalanches from the rocks. And yet my coachman obstinately insisted that it was the high-road. I should like, then, to see your foot-paths; they must be practicable for chamois only."

Valentin smiled. "You are the same old fellow,—always sneering and criticising. Leave us, Michael, and tell the gentleman's coachman to put up his horses."

Michael left the room, but not before the stranger had turned and glanced at him. "Have you set up a famulus? Who is that dreamer?"

"My pupil, whom I teach."

"You must have hard work to get anything inside that head! That fellow's talent would seem to lie solely in his fists."

As he spoke the guest had taken off his furs, and was seen to be a man about five or six years younger than the pastor, of hardly medium height, but with a very distinguished head, which, with its broad brow and intellectual features, riveted attention at the first glance. The clear, keen eyes seemed used to probe everything to the core, and in the man's whole bearing there was evident the sense of superiority which comes of being regarded as an authority in one's own circle.

He looked keenly about him, investigating the pastor's study and adjoining room, both of which displayed a monastic simplicity; and as he turned his eyes from one object to another in the small apartment, he said, without a trace of sarcasm, but with some bitterness, "And here you have cast anchor! I never imagined your solitude so desolate and world-forsaken. Poor Valentin! You have to pay for the assault that my investigations make so inexorably upon your dogmas, and for my works being down in the 'Index.'"

The pastor repudiated this charge by a gentle gesture. "What an idea! There are frequent changes in ecclesiastical appointments, and I came to Saint Michael—"

"Because you had Hans Wehlau for a brother," the other completed the sentence. "If you would publicly have cut loose from me, and thundered from your pulpit against my atheism, you would have been in a more comfortable parsonage, I can tell you. It is well known that there has been no breach between us, although we have not seen each other for years, and you must pay for it. Why did you not condemn me publicly? I never should have taken it ill of you, since I know that you absolutely repudiate my teachings."

"I condemn no one," the pastor said, softly; "certainly not you, Hans, although it grieves me sorely to see you so greatly astray."

"Yes; you never had any talent for fanaticism, but always a very great one for martyrdom. It often vexes me horribly, though, that I am the one to help you to it. I have taken good care, however, that my visit to-day should not be known; I am here *incognito*. I could not resist the temptation to see you again on my removal to Northern Germany."

"What! you are going to leave the university?"

"Next month. I have been called to the capital, and I accepted immediately, since I know it to be the sphere suited to me and to my work. I wanted to bid you good-by; but I nearly missed you, for, as I hear, you were at Steinrück yesterday at the Count's funeral."

"By the Countess's express desire I officiated."

"I thought so! They summoned me by telegraph to Berkheim to the death-bed."

"And you went?"

"Of course, although I gave up practice long ago for the professorial chair. This was an exceptional case. I can never forget how the Steinrücks befriended me, employing me when I was a young, obscure physician, upon your recommendation, to be sure, but they placed every confidence in me. I could, indeed, do nothing for the Count except to make death easier, but my presence was a satisfaction for the family."

Michael's entrance interrupted the conversation. He came to say that the sacristan wished to speak for a moment with his reverence, and was waiting outside.

"I will come back immediately," said Valentin. "Put away your books, Michael; there will be no lessons to-day."

He left the room, and Michael began to gather up the books and papers. The Professor watched him, and said, casually, "And so the Herr Pastor teaches you?"

Michael nodded and went on with his occupation.

"It's just like him," murmured Wehlau. "Here he is tormenting himself with teaching this stupid fellow to read and write, probably because there is no school in the neighbourhood. Let me look at that."

And he took up one of the copy-books, nearly dropping it on the instant in his surprise. "What! Latin? How is this?"

Michael did not comprehend his surprise; it seemed to him quite natural to understand Latin, and he answered, quietly, "Those are my exercises."

The Professor looked at the lad, whose dress proclaimed him a mere peasant, scanned him from head to foot, and then turning over the leaves of the book, read several lines and shook his head.

"You seem to be an excellent Latin scholar. Where do you come from?"

"From the forester's, a couple of miles away."

"And what is your name?"

"Michael."

"Your name is that of the hamlet. Were you named after it?"

"I don't know,—I think I was named after the archangel Michael." He uttered the name with a certain solemnity, and Wehlau, noticing it, asked, with a sarcastic smile, "You hold the angels in great respect?"

Michael threw back his head. "No, they only pray and sing through all eternity, and I don't care for that; but I like Saint Michael. At least he does something: he thrusts down Satan."

There must have been something unusual either in his words or in his expression, for the Professor started and riveted his keen eyes upon the face of the lad, who stood close to him, full in the sunlight that entered by the low window. "Strange," he murmured again. "The face is utterly changed. What is there in the features—?"

At this moment Valentin reappeared, and, seeing the book in his brother's hand, asked, "Have you been examining Michael? He is a good Latin scholar is he not?"

"He is, indeed; but what good is Latin to do him in a lonely forest lodge? I suppose his father is too poor to send him to school?"

"But I hope to do something for him in some other way," said the pastor; and as Michael took his books to the cupboard he went on, in a low tone, "If the poor fellow were only not so ugly and awkward! Everything depends upon the impression that he makes in a certain quarter, and I fear it will be very unfavourable."

"Ugly?—yes, he certainly is that; and yet a moment ago, when he made quite an intelligent remark, something flashed into his features like lightning, reminding me of—yes, now I have it—of Count Steinrück."

"Of Count Steinrück?" Valentin repeated, in surprise.

"I don't mean the man who has just died, but his cousin, the head of the elder branch. He was in Berkheim the other day, and I became acquainted with him there. He would consider my idea an insult, and he would not be far wrong. To compare Steinrück, dignified and handsome as he is, with that moonstruck lad! They have not a feature in common. I cannot tell why the thought came into my head, but it did when I saw the fellow's eyes flash."

The pastor made no reply to this last observation, but said, as if to change the subject, "Yes, Michael is certainly a dreamer. Sometimes in his apathy and indifference he seems to me like a somnambulist."

"Well, that would not be very dreadful," said his brother. "Somnambulists can be awakened if they are called in the right way, and when that lad wakes up he may be worth something. His exercises are very good."

"And yet learning has been made so hard for him! How often he has had to contend with storm and wind rather than lose a lesson, and he has never missed one!"

"Rather different from my Hans," the Professor said, dryly. "He employs his school-hours in drawing caricatures of his teachers; my personal interference has been necessary at times. He is too audacious, because he has been such a lucky sort of fellow. Whatever he tries succeeds; wherever he knocks doors and hearts fly open to receive him, and consequently he imagines that life is all play,—nothing but amusement from beginning to end. Well, I'll show him another side of the picture when once he begins to study natural science."

"Has he shown any inclination for such study?"

"Most certainly not. His only inclination is for scrawling and daubing; there's no doing anything with him if he scents a painted canvas, but I'll cure him of all that."

"But if he has a talent for—" the pastor interposed.

His brother angrily interrupted him: "That's the worst of it,—a talent! His drawing-masters stuff his head with all sorts of nonsense; and awhile ago a painter fellow, a friend of the family, made a tragic appeal to me,—Could I answer it to myself to deprive the world of such a gift? I was positively rude to him; I couldn't help it."

Valentin shook his head half disapprovingly. "But why do you not allow your son to follow his inclination?"

"Can you ask? Because an intellectual inheritance is his by right. My name stands high in the scientific world, and must open all doors for Hans while he lives. If he follows in my footsteps he is sure of success; he is his father's son. But God have mercy on him if he takes it into his head to be what they call a genius!"

Meanwhile, Michael had put away his books, and now advanced to take his leave. Since there was to be no lesson, there was no excuse for his remaining any longer at the parsonage. His face again showed the same vacant, dreamy expression peculiar to it; and as he left the room Wehlau said in an undertone to his brother, "You are right; he is too ugly, poor devil!"

The Counts of Steinrück belonged to an ancient and formerly very powerful family, dating back centuries. Its two branches owned a common lineage, but were now only distantly connected, and there had been times when there had been no intercourse between them, so widely had they been sundered by diversity of religious belief.

The elder and Protestant branch, belonging to Northern Germany, possessed entailed estates yielding a moderate income; the South-German cousins, on the contrary, were owners of a very large property, consisting chiefly of estates in fee, and were among the wealthiest in the land. This wealth was at present owned by a child eight years of age, the daughter whom the late Count had constituted his sole heiress. Conscious of the hopeless nature of his malady, he had summoned his cousin, and had made him the executor of his will and his daughter's guardian. Thus had been adjusted an estrangement that had existed for years, and that had its rise in an alliance once contracted, only to be suddenly dissolved.

Besides his son, the present Count Steinrück had had another child,—a beautiful, richly-endowed daughter, the favourite of her father, whom she resembled in character and in mind. She was to have married her relative, the Count now deceased; the union had long been agreed upon in the family, and the young Countess had consequently spent many weeks at a time beneath the roof of her future parents-in-law.

But before there had been any formal betrothal between the young people, there intervened with the girl of eighteen one of those passions which lead,—which must lead—to ruin, not because of difference of rank and social standing, not because of the consequent estrangement of families, but because they lack the only thing that can confer upon a union a blessing and endurance,—true, genuine affection. It was an intoxication sure to be followed by remorse and repentance when, alas, it was too late.

Louise became acquainted with a man who, although of bourgeois parentage, had worked his way into aristocratic circles. Brilliantly handsome, endowed with various accomplishments and a winning grace of manner, he succeeded in gaining entrance everywhere; but he was one of those restless, unsteady beings who can never adjust themselves for long to any environments. Possessed by a positive greed for the luxuries and splendours of existence, he had no capacity for attaining them by his own energy; he was an adventurer in the truest sense of the word. He may have loved the young Countess sincerely, he may have only hoped to achieve social position through her means; at

all events, he contrived so to ensnare her that she resolved, in spite of the certain opposition of her father and of her entire family, to become his wife.

When the Count learned how matters stood, he took them in hand with an energy that was indeed ominous. He believed that by commands and threats he could bend his daughter to his will, but he only aroused in her the obstinacy which she had inherited from himself. She utterly refused to yield him obedience, opposed resolutely all effort to carry out her betrothal to her cousin, and, in spite of every precaution, contrived to hold communication with her lover. Suddenly she disappeared, and a few days afterwards news was received that she had become the wife of Rodenberg.

The marriage was perfectly valid, in spite of the haste and secrecy with which it was contracted; Rodenberg had arranged and prepared everything. He reckoned upon Count Steinrück's final acknowledgment of his daughter's husband: he would not surely cast them off; he trusted to the father's affection for his favourite child, but he did not know the Count's iron nature. Steinrück replied to the announcement of the marriage by an utter repudiation of his daughter; he forbade her ever again to appear in his presence: for him she was dead.

He persisted inexorably in this course until his daughter's death, and even after it had taken place. At first Rodenberg made several attempts to induce his wife's father to grant him an interview, but he soon perceived the uselessness of any such attempt; the Count was neither to be persuaded nor coerced, and since all sources of aid were thus cut off, the man plunged with his wife and child into a Bohemian mode of life harmonizing with his lawless nature.

What followed was the inevitable result,—misery and want, a gradual sinking into ruin; the lot of the wife beside the husband for whom she had sacrificed name, home, and family, when all hopes founded upon her and upon her wealth had vanished, can easily be imagined. She was true to her nature, and clung to the man whom she had married, without one attempt to obtain help from her father, knowing that even her death would be powerless to effect a reconciliation. She and her husband had now been dead for many years, and the wretched family tragedy was buried with them.

An entire week had passed since the funeral at Steinrück. Count Michael, who occupied the rooms that had been his cousin's, was sitting in the bow-windowed apartment, when he was told that Wolfram the forester had arrived in obedience to his desire. The Count was in full uniform, being about to ride to a neighbouring town, where the sovereign's brother had instituted a memorial celebration. Of course every one of consequence in the country around had been invited to take part in the ceremonial, and the lord of Steinrück could not refuse to be present on the occasion, although, in view of the family bereavement, he was to withdraw before the subsequent festivities. The hour for his departure was at hand, but there was still time for his interview with the forester.

As he sat at his writing-table he took from one of its drawers the star of an order set with large brilliants. As he was about to fasten it on his breast he saw that the ribbon was loose, and as Wolfram entered at the moment, he laid it in the open case on the table.

The forester was in full dress to-day, and really looked well. His hair and beard were carefully arranged, and great pains had been bestowed upon his hunting-suit; nor did he seem to have forgotten the demeanor required in presence of his former master, for, with a respectful bow, he paused at the door until the Count motioned to him to approach.

"Ah, here you are, Wolfram," he said, kindly; "I have not seen you for a long time. Is all going well with you?"

"Pretty well, Herr Count," the forester replied, standing as straight and stiff as a ramrod. "I earn my wages, and the late Count was satisfied with me. I never have a chance to leave the forest year out and year in, but we get used to that and don't mind the loneliness."

"You were married, I think; is your wife still living?"

"No; she died five years ago, God rest her soul, and we never had any children. Some people advised me to marry again, but I didn't want to. Once is enough for me."

"Was your marriage not a happy one, then?" asked Steinrück, with a fleeting smile at the forester's last remark.

"That depends on one's way of looking at things," the forester replied, indifferently. "We got along pretty well together; to be sure, we quarrelled every day, but that's to be expected; and then if Michael interfered we both fell upon him and made up with each other."

The Count suddenly lifted his head. "Whom did you fall upon?"

"Eh?—yes, that was stupid," Wolfram muttered in confusion.

"Do you mean the boy who was given in charge to you?"

The forester cast down his eyes before the Count's angry glance and meekly defended himself. "It did not hurt him, and it didn't last long either, for the reverend father at St. Michael forbade us to beat the boy, and we obeyed. And the fellow deserved what he got, besides."

Steinrück did not reply; he knew that he had given the boy into rude keeping, but this glimpse of the realities of the situation rather startled him, and after a minute's pause he asked, sternly, "Did you bring your foster-son with you?"

"Yes, Herr Count, I have done as you bade me."

"Then let him come in."

Wolfram went to call Michael, who was waiting in the antechamber, and the Count looked eagerly and anxiously towards the door by which in another moment his grandson would enter, the child of the outcast daughter whom he had so sternly thrown off, and yet whom he had once loved so tenderly. Perhaps the boy would be the image of his mother, at all events he would resemble her in some feature, and Steinrück did not know whether he most feared or longed for such resemblance.

The door opened, and Michael entered with his foster-father. He too had bestowed greater care than usual upon his dress in view of this interview, but it had availed him little. His Sunday coat fitted him no better than his week-day garb, and, moreover, although new, was rustic in cut and material. His thick, matted curls refused to be smoothed, and were tossed more wildly than usual above his brow, while the shyness and embarrassment which he felt in such a presence made his face more vacant of expression than usual, and his awkward carriage and movements still more heavy and clumsy.

The Count cast one sharp, rapid glance at him, and but one; then he compressed his lips in an expression of bitter disappointment. This, then, this was Louise's son!

"Here is Michael, Herr Count," said Wolfram, as he roughly pushed the lad forward. "Make your bow, Michael, and thank the kind gentleman who has befriended such a poor orphan. It is the first time you have seen your benefactor."

But Michael neither bowed nor uttered a word of thanks. He gazed as if spell-bound at the Count, who was indeed an imposing figure in his uniform, and seemed to forget all else.

"Well, can't you speak?" asked Wolfram, impatiently. "You must excuse him, Herr Count, it's only his stupidity. He hardly ever opens his mouth at home, and whenever he sees anything new and strange like all this he loses the little wit he has."

It was with an expression of positive dislike that the Count at last turned to the boy, and his voice sounded cold and imperious as he asked, "Is your name Michael?"

"Yes," was the reply, uttered mechanically as it were, while the young fellow's eyes never stirred from the tall figure, and the commanding countenance turned so haughtily towards him. Steinrück did not perceive the boundless admiration in those eyes,—all that he saw was their dreamy, vague expression, a curious stare that irritated him.

"How old are you?" he asked, in the same tone.

"Eighteen."

"And what do you know? what can you do?"

This question seemed to embarrass Michael extremely; he did not speak, but looked at the forester, who answered for him. "He does not do much of anything, Herr Count, although he runs about the forest all day long, and he does not know much either. I have no time to look after him; at

first we sent him to the village school, and later on his reverence took him in hand and taught him. But he couldn't do much with him, Michael can't understand well."

"But he must adopt some calling. What is he fit for? what does he want to be?"

"Nothing at all,—and he is fit for nothing," said the forester, laconically.

"This is a fine account of you," said the Count, contemptuously. "To run about the forest all day long is not much to do, and can be done with but little instruction; it is a disgrace for a strong young fellow like you to be fit for nothing else."

Michael looked surprised at these harsh words, and a dark flush began to mount into his cheeks, but the forester assented with, "Yes, I think so too; but there is nothing to be done with Michael. Just look at him, Herr Count; no one can ever make a decent forester of him."

It seemed to cost the Count an effort to continue an interview so repugnant to him, but he controlled himself, and said, sternly and authoritatively, "Come here!"

Michael never stirred; he stood as if he had not heard the command.

"Have you not even learned obedience?" Steinrück asked, in a menacing tone. "Come here, I say!"

But Michael still stood motionless, until the forester, feeling himself called upon to come to the rescue of what was probably stupidity, seized him roughly by the shoulder, encountering, however, decided resistance on the part of his foster-son, who shook him off angrily. There was only defiance in the movement, but it looked like a desire for flight, and as such the Count understood it. "A coward, too!" he murmured. "There has been quite enough of this!"

He rang the bell and ordered the servant to have the carriage brought round immediately. Then he turned to the forester, and said, "I have a word or two to say to you; follow me," as, opening the door of a small adjoining room, he preceded him into it.

Wolfram attempted, as he followed, to excuse his foster-son's conduct: "He is afraid of you, Herr Count; the fellow has not a spark of courage."

"So I see," Steinrück rejoined, with infinite contempt; he could forgive almost anything save cowardice,—that was inexcusable in his eyes. "Never mind, Wolfram, I know you cannot help it; but you must keep the fellow for a while yet; there is nothing for him but this mountain forestry; he may dream away his life here for all I care, since he is good for nothing else."

He went on talking to the forester without bestowing another glance upon Michael, who stood motionless. The dark flush had not faded from his face, which was no longer expressionless. Gloomily, with compressed lips, he gazed after the man who had just passed so pitiless a verdict upon himself and his future. He had often heard such words before from the forester without their producing any effect upon him, but they had a different sound when issuing from those haughty lips, and the contemptuous glance of those eyes pierced him to the very soul. For the first time he felt the treatment to which he had been accustomed from childhood as a burning disgrace, crushing him to the earth.

He was alone in the room. Through the bow-window the sunlight streamed in, and fell full upon the writing-table, where the diamonds in the star of the order glittered and sparkled in every colour of the rainbow. Even on the dark wainscoting bright gleams were playing, and they mingled with the glow of the fire upon the hearth, which was sinking away to embers.

"What are you doing here?" a child's voice suddenly asked.

Michael turned round; upon the threshold of the adjoining room, the door of which had been left open, stood a child about eight years of age, looking in amazement at the stranger, who now answered, laconically, "I am waiting."

The little girl, the daughter of the deceased Count, approached and gazed curiously at the lad, then, probably arriving at the conclusion that this coarsely-dressed young man could not possibly be a visitor in the castle, turned up her little nose, although, since he was waiting for somebody, she could not object to his presence. She turned to the hearth, where she amused herself by blowing into the embers and watching the sparks.

She was a graceful little creature, slender and delicate as a fairy, undeniably pretty, in spite, many would have said, of the red hue of the hair that fell in long thick curls over her shoulders and down upon the black crape of her dress, giving a strange charm to the childish figure. A pair of large eyes, undeterminable in colour, looked out of the rosy little face; they shone like stars, but there was an odd gleam in them,—they were not innocent, childish eyes.

Before long she grew tired of watching the sparks, and looking about for some other amusement her glance fell again upon Michael, whom she now honoured with a longer inspection. "Where did you come from?" she asked, standing directly in front of him.

"From the forest," he replied, as laconically as before.

"Is it far from here?"

"Very far."

"And do you like our castle?"

"No."

Hertha gazed at him with surprise in her bright eyes; she had asked the question with much condescension, and this strange man had dared to declare briefly and dryly that he did not like a Count's castle. As she was apparently considering whether or not to be displeased, her glance fell upon Michael's hat, which he held in his hand, and which was adorned with a bunch of magnificent Alpine roses. "Oh, what beautiful flowers!" she exclaimed. "Give them to me." And she had possessed herself of the hat and pulled out the flowers before Michael could say a word. He looked rather amazed to see this appropriation of his property, but made no attempt to prevent it.

The child seated herself in an arm-chair beside the hearth, seeming delighted with her flowers, and began to talk easily and familiarly. She told about the big castle where she had been accustomed to live with her mother and father, and where it was all much prettier than here, of her pony upon which she had learned to ride, and which had unfortunately been left there, of her mother, and of much else besides. The apparent dulness of her hearer seemed to amuse her mightily; she tried to make him talk, and actually did extort from him that he was the forester's son, and lived high up in the mountains in the forest lodge, a fact that interested her much.

There was something bewitching in the sweet, beguiling childish voice, and in the fairy-like little figure nestling gracefully among the cushions of the arm-chair, where the hair glistened against the dark background. Michael slowly drew near, and gradually began to reply more easily; this beguiling talk and laughter cast about him a spell the power of which he vaguely felt, although he did not understand it, and could not shake it off.

As she talked, Hertha continued to play with the flowers, which she separated, arranged, and rearranged, but at last wearying of them she began to pull to pieces the nosegay she had so ardently coveted. Her little hands pitilessly destroyed the white blossoms, throwing them heedlessly on the ground. Michael frowned, and in a tone of remonstrance, but still more of entreaty, said, "Do not pull them to pieces! Those flowers were hard to find."

"But I don't like them any more," declared the child, and she continued her work of destruction. Without further ado Michael seized her by the arm and held her fast.

"Let me go!" exclaimed the little girl, angrily trying to escape from his grasp. "I don't like your flowers any more; and I don't like you, either, any more. Go away!"

There was more than mere childish waywardness in these words. The "I don't like you, either, any more," sounded haughty and contemptuous, and meanwhile the strange gleam appeared in the eyes that made them so unchildlike. Michael suddenly loosened his grasp of her arm, but at the same moment snatched the flowers from her.

Hertha slipped down from the arm-chair, and her lips quivered as if she were about to burst into tears, but her eyes flashed with anger. "My flowers! give me back my flowers!" she screamed, stamping her little feet with rage.

Just then Wolfram reappeared. His interview with the Count must have been highly satisfactory, for he looked extremely contented. "Come, Michael, we are going," he said, beckoning to his foster-son.

Hertha knew the forester, who had been at the castle in the hunting season as one of her father's servants, and instantly surmising that he would help her to obtain what she wanted, she ran up to him. "I want my flowers back!" she exclaimed, with all the petulance of a spoiled, wayward child. "They are mine; make him give them back to me!"

"What flowers?" said Wolfram. "Those Alpine roses? Give them to her, Michael. She is our master's daughter."

The child shook her curls triumphantly, and stretched out her hand for the roses; but Michael was upon his guard, and held the nosegay so high that she could not reach it.

"Come, do you hear?" the forester said, impatiently. "Don't you understand? You must give the little Countess the flowers this instant."

"This instant!" Hertha repeated, the childish voice that had been so sweet now sounding shrill and authoritative. Michael looked down at the small despot for one or two moments and then suddenly tossed the flowers into the fireplace.

"Go and get them, then!" he said, roughly; and, turning his back upon her, he left the room.

"Upon my word, the fellow does me credit to-day! Only wait until I get him home," muttered Wolfram, with suppressed rage, as he followed the lad.

Hertha was left alone; she stood motionless, looking wide-eyed after the pair, but in another instant she bethought herself and ran hastily to the fireplace. The flickering flame was devouring its prey; the delicate white blossoms glowed red for an instant like fairy flowers, and then curled up and sank to ashes.

The little girl folded her hands and looked on, her face still angry and defiant, but gradually her eyes filled with tears, and when the last of the flowers had perished in its fiery bed, she suddenly burst into loud sobs.

When Count Steinrück, after a few minutes, returned to his study, he found no one there. A glance at the clock showed him that it was time he were gone, and he hurriedly went to the writing-table to get the order that was to complete his uniform. The case was still where he had left it, but it was empty; probably the servant had seen what was wrong with the ribbon and had taken it away to arrange it. Steinrück rang the bell. "My order," he said, hurriedly, to the man who appeared in answer to the ring. "Is the carriage there?"

"Yes, Herr Count; but the order,—it is usually in the Herr Count's own possession."

"Of course; I took it out to-day,—the large star of diamonds. Did you not observe that the ribbon was loose?"

The servant shook his head. "I did not see the star. I was only in the room a moment to receive the Herr Count's order about the carriage."

Steinrück looked in extreme astonishment at the empty case. "Have you not been in the room since?"

"No, Herr Count."

"Has no one else been here?"

"The forester's son was here when I left the room, and, I think, was here alone for some time."

There was suspicion more than hinted at in these words, but the Count shook his head decidedly. "Nonsense! that's impossible. Has no one else been here? Bethink yourself."

"No, Herr Count; no one has even been in the corridor."

"But the bedroom on that side,—it is a thoroughfare."

"Only from the sleeping apartment of the Frau Countess by the tapestried door."

Steinrück turned pale, and involuntarily he clinched his hand, but he still combated the dawning suspicion. "Look for it," he said. "The star must be found; perhaps I mislaid it among the books and papers."

And without waiting for the man's assistance he began to look for the jewel himself. He knew perfectly well that he had laid the star in the case, which he had left open; nevertheless, he lifted every book and paper, and searched every drawer, but to no purpose the thing was not to be found.

"It is not here," the servant said at last, in a low tone. "If it was lying here in the open case, there is but one explanation."

Steinrück made no reply. He himself doubted no longer. "A thief, then! A common thief!" The measure of his contempt and aversion was filled to the brim.

There was silence for a few minutes; the servant stood waiting for orders, startled by the expression on his master's face.

"Is Wolfram still in the castle?" the Count asked at last.

"I think he is. He wanted to see the major-domo."

"Then send his son to me! But not a word of what has happened!—not even to the forester; send the boy here."

The man left the room, and for a moment Steinrück covered his eyes with his hand. This was terrible! And yet was it unnatural in the son of such a father? The lad's whole appearance showed that he had inherited not a drop of his mother's blood, and that other that filled his veins, did it not proclaim itself what it was, and was it not a duty to disclaim it and thrust it forth? Away with it!

The Count stood erect, resolute as ever, when Michael entered, unwillingly to be sure, but with no idea of what this new summons betokened.

"Close the door," said Steinrück, "and come here!"

This time no second command was necessary: Michael obeyed without hesitation. He stood before the Count, who, looking him directly in the eye, held out to him the empty case. "Do you know what this is?" he asked, with apparent composure.

The young man shook his head; he did not comprehend the strange question.

"It was lying here on the writing-table," Steinrück continued, "but it was not empty as it is now. It contained a star of sparkling stones. Did you not see it?"

Michael reflected. That, then, must have been the glittering object that sparkled so in the sunlight, but of which he had taken little heed.

"Well, I am waiting for an answer," said the Count, still keeping his eye fixed on Michael's. "Where is the star?"

"How should I know?" asked Michael, more and more surprised at this strange examination.

The Count's lips quivered. "You do not know, then? You are hardly so stupid as you pretend to be. You act a farce extremely well. Where is the star? I must know, and that instantly."

The threatening tone of the last words revealed the truth to the lad, and he stood as if paralyzed, so horrified, so dismayed, that for the moment he was utterly incapable of exculpating himself. His aspect deprived Steinrück of all shadow of doubt. He saw in it the consciousness of guilt.

"Confess, fellow!" he said in an undertone, but with terrible emphasis. "Give up what you have stolen, and thank God that I let you go scot-free. Do you hear? Give up your booty!"

Michael shrank as if he had received a stab, but in an instant he burst forth, "I a thief? I take—"

"Hush!" interrupted Steinrück, angrily. "I will have no noise, no commotion, but you do not stir from the spot until you have confessed. Confess!"

He seized the young fellow by the arm, and his grasp was like iron, but with a single wrench Michael freed himself. "Let go of me!" he gasped. "Never say that again! Never again, or—"

"What! you would threaten besides?" cried the Count, who took this outburst for the height of insolence. "Take care, boy; one word more, and I shall forget to spare you."

"I am no thief!" shouted Michael; "and whoever dares call me so I'll fell him to the earth!"

In an instant he had seized a heavy silver candelabrum from the table and swung it like a weapon towards the Count, who recoiled a step,—not from the menaced blow, but from the face confronting him. Was that the same young man that had stood there a few moments before with the vacant, dreamy countenance, the timid, sheepish air? He reared his head now like a wounded lion ready to rush upon the stronger foe, rage and savage hatred informing every feature. And Steinrück's eyes, flashing annihilation, encountered two other eyes, dark blue like his own, and gleaming with the same fire. There was one breathless moment. No coward, no thief, ever looked like that.

The door flew open,—the loud, menacing voice must have been heard in the anteroom,—and the forester appeared on the threshold, the frightened face of the servant looking over his shoulder.

"Boy, are you mad?" shouted Wolfram, hastening to his master's aid, and seizing Michael by the shoulder. But the lad shook himself free as a wounded stag shakes off the murderous pack, then dashed the candelabrum on the ground, and rushed to the door. But here he was intercepted by the servant. "Hold him!" the man cried out to the forester. "He must not escape! He has robbed the Herr Count!"

Wolfram, who was about to secure his foster-son, paused in horror. "Michael,—a thief?"

A cry burst from the lips of the tortured boy, a cry so desperate that Steinrück interfered hurriedly, and would have ordered both men to refrain, but it was too late. The servant staggered aside beneath the blow of Michael's powerful young fist, and the lad rushed past him and away, as if goaded to madness by those terrible words.

When Wolfram the forester made his appearance at St. Michael's parsonage, he seemed to be expected, for his reverence came to meet him in the hall.

"Well, Wolfram, any tidings yet?"

"No, your reverence, not a trace of the fellow; but I come from the castle; and I have something from there to tell you."

Valentin opened the door of his study and beckoned the forester to follow him, but he was evidently not as much interested in news from the castle as in the question which he repeated with anxiety. "Then Michael has not been at home yet?"

"No, your reverence, not yet."

"This is the third day, and we have no trace of him. I trust he has come to no harm."

"He couldn't come to harm," the forester said, with a harsh laugh. "He's wandering about, not daring to come home, because he knows what he'll get when he does come; but he'll have to show himself at last, and then—God have mercy on him!"

"What do you mean to do, Wolfram? Remember your promise."

"I kept it as long as there was anything to be done with the fellow, but that's over now. If he thinks that he can knock down and run over everybody he shall learn that there is one man at least who is a match for him. I'll make him feel that, so long as I can lift a finger."

"You will not touch Michael until I have had a talk with him," said the priest, gravely. "You say you come from the castle. How are they there? Has the missing order been found at last?"

"Yes, the very day it was lost. Little Countess Hertha had taken away the glittering thing to play with, and after a while she ran with it to her mother, and so the whole matter was explained."

"All because of a child's carelessness, then," Valentin said, bitterly, "a degrading, shameful suspicion fell upon Michael, who—"

He broke off suddenly, and the forester grumbled, "Why did he not open his lips and defend himself? I should have told them they were wrong, but Michael stood stock-still, I suppose, until they tried to seize him, and then behaved like a wounded bear. And to attack the Herr Count! You can hardly believe it, but I saw him myself, standing with the lifted candlestick. And I have to pay for the fellow's cursed behaviour. The Herr Count was very cross to-day, he would hardly speak a word to me, but he gave me a letter to bring to your reverence."

He took an envelope from his pouch and handed it to the priest. "Very well, Wolfram. Now go, and if Michael shows himself at the lodge, send him directly to me. I forbid you to maltreat him in any way until I have talked with him."

The forester left, grumbling at being obliged to postpone his punishment of the 'cursed boy,' but vowing that it should take place for all that. When Valentin was alone he opened the letter from the Count. It was brief enough:

"I wish to inform your reverence that the missing article has been found, and of course the charge of theft is proved unfounded. With regard to your *protégé's* conduct in behaving like a madman, even daring to make an assault upon myself, instead of defending himself and helping to explain the affair, you have doubtless heard all particulars from Wolfram, and will comprehend why I must decline all compliance with your wishes. This rude, unbridled fellow, with his savage disposition, belongs to the sphere in which he has passed his life. Wolfram is just the man to control him, and he will remain in his charge. All education would be wasted upon such a nature, and I am convinced that after what has occurred you will agree with me.

"Michael, Count Steinrück."

The priest dropped the letter and sat lost in sad thought. "Not a single word of regret for the shameful suspicion that fell upon an innocent fellow-being; nothing but contempt and condemnation. And yet the boy is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh."

"Your reverence!" The words came from the half-opened door, and were spoken in a suppressed voice. Valentin started up and breathed a sigh of relief. "Michael! Are you here at last? Thank God!"

"I thought—you, too, would turn me off," Michael said, gently.

"I want to talk with you. Why do you keep at the door there? Come in."

The young man slowly approached. He wore the same Sunday suit which he had worn on that eventful day, but it had evidently been exposed to the wind and rain.

"I have been anxious about you," Valentin said, reproachfully. "No trace of you for forty-eight hours! Where have you been?"

"In the forest."

"And where did you pass the nights?"

"In the empty herdsman's-hut on the mountain."

"In all the storm? Why did you not go home?"

"I knew that Wolfram would attempt to beat me, and I do not mean to be beaten again. I wished to spare both him and myself what would have happened."

His answers sounded monotonous, but the old indifference had gone; there was something in Michael's whole air and bearing strange, gloomy, decided. He was very different from his former self. The priest looked at him with anxiety.

"Then you ought to have come to me. I expected you."

"I have come to your reverence, and what they have told you of me is not true. I am no thief."

"I know it. I never for an instant believed that you were, and now no suspicion rests upon you. The missing star has been found; little Countess Hertha carried it off for a plaything."

Michael stroked aside the damp curls from his brow, and his face wore a strange, hard expression. "Ah, the child with the red-gold hair and the beautiful evil eyes. It is she that I have to thank, is it?"

"The little girl is not to blame; she simply, after the fashion of spoiled children, carried off from her uncle's room what she supposed to be a plaything, and took it to her mother. You were the one at fault; you ought to have exculpated yourself calmly and sensibly, and the affair would have been immediately explained, instead of which—Michael, can it be true that you lifted your hand against Count Steinrück?"

"He called me a thief!" Michael gasped. "Oh, if you knew how he treated me! I was to confess—to return what I had not stolen. He never asked whether I were guilty or not. He would have liked to kick me out of the castle."

There was a degree of savage bitterness in the lad's words, and Valentin could understand it; he saw that his pupil had been irritated to madness. "They did you wrong," he said, "grievous wrong, but you ought not to have given way to furious passion, and the consequences of your anger will recoil heavily upon yourself. The Count is naturally indignant at what has occurred. You need no longer reckon upon his aid, he will hear nothing more of you."

"Will he not? But he shall hear *from* me! Once more at least."

"What do you mean? You do not propose to—?"

"Go to him! Yes, your reverence. Now that he knows to what unmerited disgrace he subjected me, he shall take it all back!"

"You propose to call Count Steinrück to account?" the priest exclaimed in dismay. "What an insane idea! You must give this up."

"No!" said Michael, in a hard, cold tone.

"Michael!"

"No, your reverence, I will not, even although you forbid my going. I choose to ask him why he called me thief."

All his thoughts revolved about this one point, the disgrace which had been heaped upon him, and which burned into his soul like red-hot iron. Valentin was at his wit's end; he saw that here his remonstrances could avail nothing, and the savage desire for revenge that was plain in this intent of the lad's filled him with dread. If Michael really carried out his plan of taking the Count to task, and if the Count should undertake to chastise the 'rough, unbridled fellow,' some terrible misfortune might ensue; it must be prevented at all hazards.

"I never thought that my words would avail so little with you," he said, sorrowfully. "Well, then, something else must appeal to you. Whether the Count has wronged you or not, it would be a crime for you to lift a finger against him; you must never—heed what I say—never confront him as a foe; he stands nearer to you than you dream."

"To me? Count Steinrück?"

"Yes. I meant to have told you hereafter of what I now reveal to you, but your insane behaviour forces me to speak. You would else be in danger of making a second assault upon—your grandfather!"

Michael started, and stood staring wide-eyed at the speaker. "My grandfather! He is—?"

"Your mother's father. But you must cherish no hopes from the tie; your mother was disinherited and cast off. Her marriage separated her forever from her family, and was her ruin."

He paused and looked at Michael, who for the moment said not a word, although it was evident that the revelation had agitated him terribly. His features worked, and his chest rose and fell as though he were labouring for breath; at last after a long pause he said, gloomily, "Go on,—is there no more to tell?"

"No, my son, no more for the present. It is a sad story, ending in grief and misery; a tissue of crime and misfortune that you could hardly understand. Hereafter, when you are older and more mature, you shall hear everything; for the present let the bare facts content you: I vouch for their truth. You see now that the person of Count Steinrück should be sacred to you."

"Sacred? When he hounded me like a thief from his door?" Michael suddenly burst forth. "He knew that he was my grandfather, and yet could treat me so! Like a dog! Ah, your reverence, you ought not to bid me hold him sacred. I hated the Count because he was so hard and pitiless to a stranger, but now,—I should like to—"

He clinched his fist with so terrible a look that Valentin involuntarily recoiled. "For the love of all the saints you would not—?"

"Touch him,—no! I know now that I must not lift my hand against him, but if I could call him to account otherwise, I would give my life for a chance to do so."

Valentin stood speechless, dismayed, though this savage outbreak was not alone what dismayed him. He too saw now what had so surprised his brother, that strange gleam that flashed out suddenly like lightning to vanish as instantly. The rugged, undeveloped features were the same, but the dreamy face had gone; as if a veil had been raised all at once there were revealed other eyes, another brow, and the movement with which Michael turned to leave the room was full of savage resolve.

"Where are you going?" the priest asked, hastily. "To the forest lodge?"

"No; I have nothing to do there now. Farewell, your reverence."

"Stay! Where, then, are you going?"

"I do not know,—away,—out into the world."

"Alone? Without means? Utterly ignorant of the world and of life? What will you do?"

"Go to ruin like my mother," the lad replied, roughly.

"No, by heaven, that you shall not!" exclaimed the priest, rising with unwonted determination. "If my vows tie my hands,—if I cannot take care of you,—I can intrust you to another. It was a special providence that brought my brother here; he will not refuse to help me: I can rely upon him."

Michael shook his head in dissent. "Better let me go, your reverence; I am accustomed to be maltreated and turned out everywhere; I do not want to be a burden upon a stranger. I can scarcely be worse off out in the world than I was with my parents. I can remember it from my earliest childhood. Neither my mother nor I ever had a kind word from my father, and he often used to beat us both; it was not very different from the life at the lodge, except that I was not starved at the forester's."

Valentin shuddered; he could not help it at the thought of the woman whom he had formerly seen in all the pride of her beauty and rank. This, then, had been the end of it all. A terrible glimpse into the depths of human misery.

"You *must* not go, Michael," he said, gently but decidedly. "There can be no question of your return to the lodge. Here you will stay until I hear from my brother,—I know beforehand what he will say,—and until then I take charge of you."

Michael did not gainsay this, and made no further attempt to depart. He turned darkly away to the window, and stood there with folded arms looking out, the same sullen determination in his look that had characterized it when he would have rushed away. Yes, the somnambulist had wakened when his name had been called, out the call had been rude, and the awakening bitter.

A golden autumnal day had arisen from the dim morning mists; the mountains were unveiled and the valleys were filled with sunshine.

The little mountain-town, which lay about a league from Castle Steinrück, nestling most picturesquely at the entrance of the valley, was harbouring a distinguished guest. Professor Hans Wehlau, of worldwide reputation as a light of science, was paying a visit to his brother-in-law, the burgomaster of the little town. For ten years the Professor had now been living in the capital of Northern Germany, where he occupied a prominent position in the university. Since the death of his wife he had rather withdrawn from society, from which his two sons were also secluded by the duties of their several occupations; the younger was completing at another university the studies in natural science which he had begun under his father's tuition, and the elder, an adopted son, the child of a friend who had died, having embraced a military career, was stationed with his regiment in a provincial town. All, however, were to share in this excursion to relatives among the mountains. The Professor had been here for some weeks, and his sons had arrived on the previous day.

The burgomaster's fine spacious house looked out upon the market square, and the upper rooms, usually unoccupied, had been placed at the disposal of the guests. The Frau Burgomeisterin did all that she could to make the stay beneath her roof of her dead sister's husband agreeable to him, and her efforts in this direction were all the more praiseworthy since she was always upon a war-footing with him. She was perpetually vacillating between respect for his reputation, very flattering to her vanity

in so near a relative, and detestation for the 'godless' scientific doctrines to which he owed his fame, and it was a great trial to her that her nephew, whom, in the absence of any children of her own, she loved like a son, should have been compelled by his father's command to pursue the path of science.

It was early in the morning, and the Professor was standing at the window of his room looking out upon the quiet market square. Wehlau had changed but little in the last ten years. He had the same intellectual face, with its sarcastic expression and piercing eyes; the hair, however, had grown gray. Beside him stood the Frau Burgomeisterin, an imposing figure, of whom the evil-disposed in Tannberg affirmed that she ruled the ruler, and was the autocrat of her household.

"And our boys are here at last!" said the Professor, in apparently high good humour. "You'll have noise and confusion enough now, for Hans will turn the house upside down. You know him of old. They both look very well: Michael, especially, has a very manly air."

"Hans is much the handsomer and more attractive," the lady rejoined, very decidedly. "Michael has neither of these qualities."

"Granted, in the eyes of you ladies, that is! On the other hand, he has an earnestness and solidity of character by which our harum-scarum Hans might well take example. It is no small distinction for so young an officer to be ordered for service on the general's staff. He surprised me yesterday with this piece of information, while Hans will have some difficulty in getting his diploma."

"That's not the poor boy's fault," his sister-in-law declared. "He has never had more than a half-hearted interest in the profession that has been forced upon him. It cost my poor sister many a secret tear to have you insist so inexorably upon his burying his talent."

"And you whole rivers of them," the Professor added, with a sneer. "You all made my life wretched combining with the boy against me, until I issued my mandate, which he was forced to obey."

"With despair in his heart. In destroying his hope of an artistic career you deprived him of his ideal,—of all the poesy of his young life."

"Don't mention Poesy, I entreat," Wehlau interrupted her. "I am on the worst of terms with that lady for all the mischief she does and the heads she turns. I set my son straight, I rejoice to say, in time. I have not noticed any despair about him. Moreover, he has not a particle of talent for it."

"Good-morning, papa!" called a gay young voice, and the subject of the conversation appeared in the door-way.

Hans Wehlau junior was a slender and very handsome young fellow of twenty-four, with nothing in his exterior to suggest the dignity of the future professor. His straw hat, before he removed it, sat jauntily upon his thick, light brown hair, and his very becoming summer suit, with a 'turn-down' shirt collar, had an artistic, rather than a learned, air. His fresh, youthful face was lit up by a pair of laughing blue eyes, and altogether there was something so attractive and endearing about him that the Professor's evident paternal pride was very easy to understand.

"Well, Head-over-heels, here you are!" he said, gayly. "I have been preparing your aunt for the turmoil that you carry with you wherever you go."

"On the contrary, sir, I have grown monstrously sedate," Hans declared, illustrating his assertion by putting his arm around the waist of his aunt, who had just innocently set down her basket of keys, and waltzing with her around the room in spite of her struggles.

"Let me alone, you unmannerly boy!" she said, out of breath, when at last he released her with a profound bow.

"Forgive me, aunt, but it was the suitable preface to my errand. The kitchen department urgently requires your presence; and, as I like to make myself useful in a house, I offered to inform you of it."

Her nephew's zeal in this respect seemed rather suspicious to the mistress of the house, who asked, "What were you doing in the kitchen?"

"Good heavens! I was only paying my respects to old Gretel."

"Indeed? And young Leni was not there?"

"Oh, I had her presented to me, as I had not seen her before. It was my duty as one of the family. My tastes are very domestic."

"My dear Hans," the Frau Burgomeisterin said, with decision, "I take no interest in your domestic tastes, and if I find them leading you into the kitchen, the doors will be locked in your face; remember that." She nodded to her brother-in-law, and sailed majestically out of the room.

"Take care, take care!" said the Professor. "Favourite as you are with your aunt, there are certain points upon which she will have no jesting; and she is right. At all events, her mind must now be set at rest with regard to your despair, as she calls it. She clings obstinately to the idea that you are unhappy in your profession."

"No, sir, I am not at all unhappy," the young man asserted, seating himself astride of a chair and looking cheerfully about him.

"I never supposed you were. Such youthful nonsense is sure to vanish of itself as soon as one is occupied with graver matters."

"Of course, papa," Hans assented, occupying himself for the time with rocking his chair to and fro, a proceeding which appeared to afford him great gratification.

"And these graver matters are comprised in science," Wehlau continued, with emphasis. "Unfortunately, I have of late—those chairs are not made to ride upon, Hans; such school-boy tricks are very unbecoming in a future doctor—I have of late had too little time to examine you thoroughly in your studies. The voluminous work which I have just completed has, as you know, absorbed all my attention. But now I am free, and we can make up for our delay."

"Of course, papa," said Hans, who had taken the paternal admonition to heart, and had left the chair, but was now seated on the corner of a table, swinging his feet.

Fortunately, the Professor, whose back was turned to him, did not see this, so the father continued to arrange some papers upon his study-table, and went on calmly: "Your student days are past, and I hope they have carried with them all your nonsense. I depend upon greater seriousness, now that we are to begin scientific study in earnest. Be diligent, Hans; you will be grateful to me one of these days when you succeed me as professor."

"Of course, papa," the obedient son observed for the third time; but as at the moment his father turned and cast an irritated glance at him, he jumped lightly from the table.

"Will you never have done with these school-boy pranks? Pray try to take example by Michael; you never see him conduct himself so."

"No, indeed," Hans laughed merrily. "The Herr Lieutenant is the embodiment of military discipline at all times. Always in position, his coat buttoned up to the throat. Who would have thought it when he came to us first, a shy, awkward boy, staring about him at the world and mankind as at something monstrous? I had to take him under my wing perpetually."

"I imagine he very soon outgrew any wing of yours," the Professor said, sarcastically.

"More's the pity. The case is reversed now, and he orders me about. But confess, papa, that at first you despaired of making a human being of Michael."

"As far as conventionalities are concerned, I certainly did. He had learned more, far more, than I had supposed. My brother had been an excellent teacher to him, and when he was once aroused, he applied himself with such unwearied diligence and interest that I often wondered at the strength of character shown in divesting himself of all his childish, dreamy ways."

"Yes, Michael was always your favourite," Hans said, discontentedly. "You never put any force upon him, but agreed instantly to his desire to be a soldier, while I—"

"It was a very different thing," his father interrupted him. "As matters stand, Michael was forced to shape his future and his mode of life himself, and with his temperament he is best fitted for a soldier. The reckless dash at a goal without a glance either to the right or to the left, the stern law of duty, the despotic subduing of antagonistic qualities beneath the iron yoke of discipline, all accord

perfectly with his character, and he will inevitably rise in the army. You, on the other hand, must reap what I have sown, and therefore abide in my domain; your life is conveniently arranged for you."

The young man's air betrayed but a small degree of satisfaction with this arrangement; but he suddenly started up and exclaimed, gayly, "Here comes Michael!"

Ten years are a long time in a human existence, and they seem doubly long when they occur at the season when a man develops most rapidly; in Michael's case the change wrought by the years bordered on the marvellous. The former foster-son of Wolfram the forester and the young officer were two different individuals, who had not a characteristic in common.

Handsome, Michael Rodenberg certainly was not,—in that respect he was far behind Hans Wehlau,—but he was one who could never pass unnoticed. His tall, muscular figure seemed created to wear a uniform and to gird on a sword. It had exchanged all the awkwardness of the boy for the erect carriage of the soldier. His fair, close curls had lost none of their luxuriance, but they were carefully arranged, and the bearded face, if it could lay no claim to beauty, was interesting enough without it. All that was boyish in it had vanished, the strong, resolute head was that of ripe manhood,—a manhood too early ripened, perchance, for the countenance expressed at times a degree of gravity which was almost sternness, and which does not belong to youth.

In the eyes, too, there was none of the old dreamy look; their gaze had grown keen and firm, but they never had learned to sparkle with the joyous inspiration of youth. There was something chilling in them, as indeed in the whole air of the young man, which only at intervals, in conversation, was animated by a genial glow. Yet, as he stood there, erect, firm, resolute, he was the ideal of a soldier from head to heel.

"In uniform?" asked the Professor, surprised, as Michael bade him good-morning. "Have you an official visit to pay here?"

"After a fashion, yes; I must go over to Elmsdorf. The former chief of my regiment, Colonel von Reval, since he resigned, has always spent the summer and autumn at his country-seat there. He probably thinks that I have been here some time, for I found upon my arrival yesterday a few lines from him inviting me to Elmsdorf. My aunt will, I hope, excuse me; the colonel has been very kind to me."

"You were always his special favourite," Hans remarked. "When he returned at the close of the Danish war, he came to see papa to congratulate him upon having so distinguished a son. I was furious at the time, for as I had heard nothing for weeks except songs of praise in your honour, with animadversions upon my insignificance, your doughty deeds were deeply annoying to me."

"Most certainly no one ever congratulated me upon possessing *you*, at least during your university course," Wehlau observed, sharply. "Moreover, we expected you here last week; why did you come so late?"

"On Michael's account; he could not get leave until he had accompanied his regiment into quarters after being on special duty. When I went to his quarters to find him, I had a piece of luck—"

"As usual!" the Professor interjected.

"Yes. I had made up my mind to spend a week in that dull provincial town, but on my arrival I heard that Michael was three miles away, in a gay little watering-place, near which his regiment was exercising. Of course I hurried after him, with a blessing upon the wisdom of the military authorities. The Herr Lieutenant was indeed head over ears in strict attention to duty, and quite deaf and blind to all else, even to an acquaintance for which every other officer of his corps envied him, and of which he would not take the least advantage. No one else could gain admission at Countess Steinrück's; she was very much of an invalid."

The Professor was evidently struck by the name, and cast a keen glance at Michael. "Countess Steinrück?"

"Of Berkheim. You know her, papa; for, as she herself told me, you were often at her father-in-law's when you were a young physician, and at her request you went to her when her husband was dying. She is very grateful yet to you for doing so."

"Of course I know her; but how did you make her acquaintance, Michael?"

"By accident," was the laconic reply.

"It was certainly by no fault of his," Hans said, in a mocking tone that plainly betrayed his ignorance of the part played in Michael's life by the name of Steinrück. "I must tell you the story in detail, papa; it begins very romantically. Well, Michael was sitting in the forest,—that is, he was in command of his men there and ordering them to fire,—when a carriage came driving along a road in the distance. The horses were frightened by the firing and ran away; the coachman lost his reins, and the danger was imminent, when from the dim forest near by a gallant knight rushed to the rescue, stopped the horses, tore open the carriage door, and lifted out the fainting ladies—"

"Stick to the truth, Hans," the young officer interposed, with some irritation. "Neither the danger nor the heroism was as great as you describe. I merely saw that the horses were frightened, and ran up to avert an accident; but the brutes stopped as soon as I caught hold of their bridles, and the ladies sat still in the carriage. No need of any poetical exaggeration."

"Nor of such prosaic treatment of facts," Hans retorted. "I heard the story from the Countess herself, and she persists quite as obstinately in saying that you saved her life as you persist in denying having done so."

Michael shrugged his shoulders and turned to the Professor. "In fact, the Countess did thus persist, and as the house where I was staying was near her villa I could not avoid frequent meetings with her. But I was very much occupied with the service, and had but little time at my disposal."

"Yes, yes, that eternal 'service'!" exclaimed Hans, indignantly. "At last he was never to be seen. It was with the greatest difficulty that I persuaded him to find time to introduce me, and when he had done so he went off, and left me to explain and apologize for his extraordinary behaviour. The ladies made him the most amiable advances, but he was a perfect icicle."

"Michael probably has his own reasons for his conduct," said Wehlau; "and if he thought best to maintain a degree of reserve, you would have done well to follow his example."

"Ah, no; that was simply out of the question. The young Countess was too beautiful,—a perfect princess in a fairy-tale: superb golden hair and eyes that shine like stars. They can beguile, those eyes of hers."

"And can scorn," Michael added, in a tone the coldness of which contrasted strongly with his friend's enthusiasm. "Beware of them, Hans; it is a sad fate to be first beguiled and then scorned."

"You say that because the Countess Hertha is thought very haughty. I too believe that any man who could not reckon up ten generations of ancestors at least would have but a poor chance if he were audacious enough to woo her. Since, however, I do not covet that honour, nothing hinders my admiration. And if I should really allow myself to be beguiled by those eyes—"

"Come, come; let all that alone," his father cut short his son's sentence. "You have no business with fairy princesses or starry eyes; I bar all such nonsense. All that you have to think about is your coming thesis."

The two young men exchanged a hasty, significant glance, and Michael said, lightly, "Do not be troubled, uncle. If Hans is a little scorched, it will do him no harm; he is used to it."

"Yes, he has been childish and silly enough, but now he will have the kindness to adopt a graver tone. I have an unoccupied morning to-day, Hans, and we will have an exhaustive talk about your studies. The sketch of them that you gave me in the holidays was very slight. I want now to know all about them."

Again the young men exchanged a glance that seemed to betoken a secret understanding, as the Professor arose and said, casually, "I only want to tell Leni that she must be careful to-day about sending my letters to the post. I shall be back immediately," with which he left the room.

Hans looked after him, folded his arms, and said, in an undertone, "Now for the bursting of the bomb!"

"Do not take the matter so easily," Michael admonished him. "You certainly have a hard battle to fight; my uncle will be furious."

"I know it; that's why I am all armed and equipped. You're not going; I can't spare you. When the fight grows too hot I shall summon you as my *corps de réserve*. Do stay and help me."

"I am glad, at all events, that there is to be no more secrecy," said the young officer, discontentedly, as he withdrew into the recess of a window. "I promised you to be silent, but it was very hard for me; harder than for you."

"Bah! I did not know what else to do. And you soldiers admit that all's fair in war. Hush! here he comes! Now for the assault!"

The Professor re-entered the room, and took his seat comfortably in an arm-chair, beckoning his son to take his place beside him. "You certainly have been in good hands," he began. "My colleague, Bauer, is an authority in his specialty, and shares my views entirely. That was the reason why I yielded to your earnest entreaty and sent you for two years to B—. I was afraid that the chief attraction for you lay in the gay student life there, but I nevertheless judged it best that you should pursue your studies under other guidance than my own, after I had laid the foundation for them. Now let me hear."

The young man was evidently made very uncomfortable by this prelude; he twirled his handsome moustache, and stammered somewhat as he replied, "Yes,—Professor Bauer; I attended his lectures—very regularly."

"Of course; I recommended you to him particularly."

"But I did not learn anything from him."

Wehlau frowned, and said, reprovingly, "Hans, it is very unbecoming so to criticise a worthy man of science. His delivery, to be sure, leaves much to be desired, but his treatises are admirable."

"Good heavens, I am not speaking of the Herr Professor's treatises, but of my own, and they were unfortunately far from admirable. I felt that myself, and accordingly I made a slight change in my course of study."

"Against my express directions. I laid out your course precisely for you. To whom did you go, then?"

Hans hesitated to reply, and glanced towards the window where his 'reserves' were stationed, before he said, in a rather constrained voice, "To—to Professor Walter."

"Walter? Who is he? I do not know the name."

"Oh, papa, you surely must have heard of Friedrich Walter. He has a world-wide reputation as an artist."

"As a what?" the Professor asked, not crediting his ears.

"As an artist, and that was the reason why I wanted to go to B—. Master Walter lives there, and did me the honour of receiving me into his atelier. In fact, I have not applied myself to the study of natural science; I have become a painter!"

It was out at last. Wehlau sprang to his feet, and stared speechless at his son.

"Boy, are you mad?" he cried; but Hans, who knew well that his only hope lay in not allowing his father to speak, rattled on very quickly, "I have been very diligent all these two years, extremely diligent. My teacher will tell you so; he thinks I may safely be left to myself now, and when I came away he said to me, 'It will surely delight your father to see the progress you have made; refer any one to me.'"

All this was uttered with extreme volubility; the words fell like honey from his lips, but it did him no good any longer; at last the Professor understood that there was no jest about the 'slight change' of studies, and he burst forth, "And you dare to brave me thus! You dare secretly, behind my back,

to play such a farce; to defy my command, to laugh my wishes to scorn; and now you imagine that I shall yield in the matter, and say 'yes,' and 'amen'? You will find yourself vastly mistaken."

Hans hung his head and looked crushed. "Do not be so hard upon me, papa! Art is my ideal, the poesy of my life, and if you knew how my conscience has pricked me for my disobedience!"

"You look as if your conscience pricked you," the Professor stormed, still more furious. "Ideal,—Poesy,—the same cursed old trash! The shibboleth to hide all the folly that men perpetrate. Never imagine that such nonsense will go down with me. Whatever pranks you may have played hitherto, now you are coming home, and I shall take you in hand. You will shortly pass the examination for your degree! Do you hear? I order you to do so."

"But I have not learned anything," Hans declared, with positive exultation. "While the lectures were going on I sketched or caricatured either the professors or the audience, as the case might be, and all that you taught me I forgot long ago; I could not write an essay a page long, and you cannot send me to the university again."

"You are actually boasting of your ignorance," said Wehlau, sternly; "and the inconceivable deception you have practised upon me you perhaps consider another piece of heroism to be proud of."

"No; only as a necessary weapon, when all other means failed. How I formerly implored and entreated you to yield to my desires, and all in vain! You would have had me sacrifice my talent, my entire future, to a profession for which I was not fitted, and in which I never could have excelled. You denied me the means for my artistic education and thought thereby to force my inclination. When I said to you, 'I want to be a painter,' you met me with an inexorable 'no.' Now I say to you, 'I am a painter,' and you will have to say 'yes.'"

"That remains to be seen," Wehlau burst forth afresh. "I will see whether I cannot govern my own son. I am master in my own house, and I'll have no rebellion there; those who oppose me will have to leave it."

The young man's cheek paled at this threat; he stepped up close to his father, and his voice sounded imploring, but gravely in earnest. "Father, do not let matters go too far between you and me. I am not made as you are. I have always had a horror of your cold lofty science that makes life so clear and so—desolate. You do not comprehend that there is another world, and that there is a temperament to which this other world is as necessary as the air to the lungs. You wring from nature her secrets; everything that lives and moves must be adjusted to your rules and theories; you know the origin and end of every created being. But you do not know your own son, whom you cannot fit to your theories. He has clasped close his morsel of poesy and ideality, and has pursued his own path, in which he will never disgrace you."

With this he turned and walked towards the door; but the Professor, who was in no wise disposed to end the interview thus, called angrily after him, "Stay, Hans! Come back this instant!"

But Hans thought fit not to hear the call, he saw that his *corps de réserve* was advancing, and he left it to Michael to cover his retreat as best he might.

"Let him go, uncle," said Michael, who had come forward some minutes before, and now attempted to soothe the angry man. "You are too irritated; you must be calmer before you speak to him again."

The admonition was vain. Wehlau had no idea of becoming calmer, and since his disobedient son was no longer present, he turned upon his advocate. "And you too have been in the plot; you knew it all; do not deny it. Hans tells you everything; why did you keep silence?"

"Because I had given my word, and could not break it, however I might dislike secrecy."

"Then you ought to have taken the boy in hand yourself and brought him to reason."

"That I could not do, for he is right."

"What! Are you beginning too?" shouted the Professor, shaking a menacing finger; but Michael held his ground and repeated firmly, "Yes, uncle, perfectly right. I never would have allowed myself to be forced to adopt a calling which I disliked and for which I was not fit. I should, it is true,

have waged more open and therefore sterner warfare than Hans has done; he has simply avoided a struggle. From the day when you forced him to the course of study you approved, and to which he ostensibly applied himself, he began to make a preliminary study of painting, but he finally perceived the impossibility of completing his artistic education beneath your eyes, and therefore he went to B—. He must have done extremely well there, for if a man like Professor Walter testifies to his artistic ability, it is indubitable, you may be sure."

"Silence!" growled the Professor. "I will not hear another word. I say no, and no again,—and—Are you coming to triumph too? I suppose you also were in the plot."

The last words were spoken to his sister-in-law, who came innocently into the room to get her basket of keys which she had left behind her, and who looked amazed at this angry reception.

"What is the matter?" asked she. "What has happened?"

"Happened? Nothing has happened! Only a very slight change in my son's studies, as he is pleased to express it. But woe to the boy if he appears before me again! He shall find out who and what I am."

With these words Wehlau strode into the next room, slamming the door behind him, while his sister-in-law gazed at Michael in dismay. "Tell me, in heavens' name, what has occurred?"

"A catastrophe. Hans has made a confession, which he could no longer suppress, to his father. He did not pursue his studies at the university, but used his time there in studying art with Professor Walter. But excuse me, aunt, I must go and find him. He had really better avoid meeting his father for the present."

So saying, Michael hastily left the room, where the Frau Burgomeisterin stood motionless for a few minutes; but at last her face broke into a beaming smile, and with an expression of supreme satisfaction she said, "And so he's played a trick upon the infallible Herr Professor, and such a trick! Darling boy!"

Elmsdorf, the estate of Herr von Reval, was situated at no great distance from the town. It was no old mountain stronghold, with an historic past, like Steinrück, but a pleasant modern country-seat which its situation made a very desirable summer residence. The house, a spacious villa with balconies and terraces, was surrounded by a park, not very extensive indeed, but charmingly laid out, and the interior of the mansion, without being magnificent, gave evidence of the taste and wealth of its possessors.

Colonel Reval had sent in his resignation from the army three years previous to our present date in consequence of wounds received in the last war. Since then he, with his wife, had spent the winters in the capital and the summers at Elmsdorf, which he had converted from a very simple abode into a charming country-seat.

Michael Rodenberg, who had served in the colonel's regiment, and afterwards had been his adjutant, had always enjoyed the special favour of his chief, who even after he had quitted the service continued to give proofs of his regard for the young officer.

Elmsdorf to-day was holding high festival, celebrating the birthday of its mistress, and, as the hospitable mansion was very popular in the country around, the company assembled was very numerous. Michael was present, of course, and Professor Wehlau and his son had also received invitations. Unfortunately, there was no hope of seeing the distinguished man of science among the guests. He excused his absence on the plea of indisposition, but in truth he was averse to all society at present, since his son's obstinate disobedience filled him with indignation and controlled his mood to a great degree. Both the young men, however, had driven over to Elmsdorf.

Herr and Frau von Reval received their guests with all the hospitable grace that made their house a social centre in all the country round about. Hans Wehlau on this occasion justified his father's assertion that he was fortune's favourite, to whom without any effort of his own all hearts and homes were flung wide open. He had scarcely been presented to the mistress of the house before she

showed him special marks of favour, every one thought him charming, and he moved among all these strangers as if he had been intimate in the household from boyhood.

All the more of a stranger did Michael feel himself to be. He possessed neither the inclination nor the capacity for so swift and easy an adaptation of himself to his surroundings. With the exception of the colonel and his wife he knew no one of the company, and the few words possible upon a casual introduction interested him but little. This brilliant assemblage, in the midst of which Hans swam like a fish in its native element, won but a passing regard from his grave, unsocial friend, who was a looker-on, not a sharer in its gayeties. Wandering through the rooms, Michael came at last to the conservatory, a quiet spot shut off from the suite of reception-rooms; with its palms, laurel-trees, and flowers, it invited to rest. Here all was cool and secluded, and the young man felt no inclination to return to the heated rooms where he could not be missed. He passed slowly from one group of plants to another, until he was interrupted by the entrance of Colonel Reval.

"Still unsocial, Lieutenant Rodenberg?" he said, in a tone half of jest, half of reproach. "You are but a poor guest at our *fête*. What are you doing here in this lonely conservatory?"

"I have just found my way hither," Michael began; "and, moreover, I am a stranger in society—"

"Only an additional reason for frequenting it. Take pattern by your young friend, who is already at home there. I missed you some time ago from the drawing-room, where I wanted to present you to Count Steinrück. You do not know him?"

"The general in command? No!"

"He came only awhile ago, and you will shortly have to report yourself to him officially. The general is extremely influential, but greatly feared because of his inflexible severity in military matters. He spares no one, least of all, indeed, himself; although he is over seventy, his age never seems to enter his mind."

Michael listened in silence; he had known that the Count was at Steinrück, and that he must be prepared for a meeting which had hitherto been spared him, but which would be unavoidable in future, since he must in time report himself to the general in command.

"We hoped to see the young Count too," Reval continued, "but we have just heard that he does not arrive until to-morrow evening. It is a pity; he would have been an interesting acquaintance for you."

"You mean the general's son, colonel?"

"No, the son died some years ago; I mean his grand son, Count Raoul. He certainly is one of the handsomest fellows I have ever seen; always foremost in youthful follies, full of talent, and with a disposition so charming that he takes everybody by storm. Indeed, he is a gifted creature, but such a madcap that he will give his grandfather no end of trouble if he does not succeed in controlling him betimes."

"Apparently, Count Steinrück is the very man to do so," Michael remarked.

"So it seems to me. Count Raoul, who fears neither man nor devil, has nevertheless a very wholesome dread of his grandfather, and when His Excellency issues an ukase, which, between ourselves, is not infrequently necessary, the young fellow is ready to obey."

A low rustle, as of silken robes, was heard behind the gentlemen, whose backs were towards the entrance; they turned, and at that instant the young officer stepped back so suddenly that the colonel looked at him in surprise.

Two ladies had entered; the elder, in dark velvet, pale, delicate, an evident invalid, seemed desirous of reaching a long low seat beneath a group of palms, where she could rest; the younger stood at the head of the flight of steps leading into the conservatory, her figure full in the light of the chandelier hanging above her head.

Hans Wehlau had described her well; she was like the princess in a fairy-tale, tall and slender, with a face of bewitching beauty, and large eyes that shone like stars, the colour of which it was impossible to define for at times they looked deeply dark, and then again brilliantly light. The red

curls that had formerly fallen upon the child's shoulders had vanished; there was now only a slight reddish tinge upon the thick golden braids, contrasting with the pale lustre of the pearls twined among them; and yet, as she stood bathed in the light from above her head, her hair gleamed like the 'red gold' of fairy treasure-chambers. Over her blue silk gown a cloud of delicate lace was looped with single flowers, with here and there a diamond dew-drop on their petals. She looked a creature woven out of sun and air.

"Ah, Countess Steinrück!" exclaimed the colonel, as he hastened to offer his arm to the elder lady, so evidently fatigued. "It was too warm in the ballroom; I am afraid you have given us the pleasure of seeing you at too great a sacrifice."

"It is only fatigue, nothing more," the Countess assured him, as he conducted her to a seat. "Why, there is Lieutenant Rodenberg!"

Michael bowed; the blue silk rustled down the steps, and Countess Hertha stood beside her mother. "Mamma is not very well," she said, "and so we left the ball-room. She will soon feel better here where it is so cool and quiet."

"It would be better then—" Michael glanced towards the colonel, and turned to leave the conservatory, but the Countess interposed with gracious courtesy,—

"Oh, do not go! It is only that the heat and noise are too much for me. I am so glad to see you again, Lieutenant Rodenberg."

The colonel seemed surprised that the young officer was acquainted with the ladies, and the Countess was pleased to tell him how the acquaintance had been made. She insisted that Michael by his prompt interference had saved her daughter's life and her own. He protested against such a statement.

Countess Hertha took no part in the conversation, which soon became animated, but turned her entire attention to the flowers. She walked slowly through the conservatory, which was but dimly lighted; there was infinite grace in her movements, but there was nothing about her of the half-shyness, half self-consciousness of girlhood. At nineteen she displayed all the *aplomb* of a woman of the world, of the wealthy heiress who doubtless knew perfectly well that she was beautiful. She paused before a group of exotic plants, and asked in an easy tone, turning her head towards Michael, "Do you know this flower, Herr Lieutenant? It is a strange, foreign-looking blossom, and I confess my botany is at fault."

Michael was forced to cross the conservatory to where she stood; he did so very deliberately, but he was a shade paler as he gave her the desired information: "It seems to be a *Dionea*, one of those murderous blossoms that close upon an insect alighting upon them, and kill their prisoner."

A half-compassionate, half-contemptuous smile played about the young girl's lips. "Poor thing! And yet it must be lovely to die in such intoxicating fragrance. Do you not think so?"

"No! Death is lovely only in freedom. No intoxication can atone for imprisonment."

The answer sounded almost rude, and Hertha bit her lip for an instant, and then changed the subject, saying, with some sarcasm, "I am glad to see that you are not so entirely monopolized by 'the service' here as you were in F—; I never met you in society there."

"We were exercising there; here I am on leave."

"Staying with Colonel Reval?"

"No, with relatives."

The tip of the little satin slipper tapped the floor impatiently: "Their name appears to be a state secret, since you so persistently suppress it."

"Not at all; there is no reason why I should do so. I am staying in Tannberg, as the guest of the brother-in-law of Professor Wehlau."

Hertha seemed surprised; she went on playing with a rose that she had plucked, while her eyes scanned the young man's face. "Oh, the little mountain town near Steinrück. We are thinking of passing several weeks at the castle."

A sudden gleam lit up Michael's face for an instant; the next moment it had vanished, and he rejoined, coolly, "Autumn is certainly very beautiful in the mountains."

This time the young Countess was not impatient; perhaps that sudden gleam had not escaped her, for she smiled, as she continued to toy with her rose: "We shall hardly meet, in spite of our being such near neighbours, for I suspect that 'the service' will make demands upon you even there."

"You are pleased to jest, Countess Steinrück."

"I am perfectly serious. We first heard of your presence here to-night from Herr Wehlau. Of course you had instantly rendered yourself invisible, and were presumably deep in a strategic discussion with the colonel, when we appeared here. We regret having interrupted it: it was evident that our intrusion annoyed you."

"You are quite mistaken; I was very glad to see you both again."

"And yet you started when you first observed us."

Michael looked up, and the glance that fell upon the young girl was stern, almost menacing, but his voice was perfectly calm as he replied, "I was surprised, as I knew that the Countess intended to return directly to Berkheim from the baths."

"We changed our plans, by special desire of my uncle Steinrück, and, moreover, the physician recommended several weeks of invigorating mountain air. Shall we not see you at the castle? My mother would be so glad, and—so should I."

Her voice was low and beguilingly sweet as she uttered the last words, standing close beside him, half in shadow, and still lovelier than when in the bright light, while from the cups of the flowers a fragrant incense arose around her. Her dress made a soft silken rustle, and the delicate lace almost brushed the arm of the young officer, who was still a little pale. He paused for a second, as if gaining self-possession, then bowed low and formally, and said, "I shall be most happy."

In spite of his words there must have been something in the tone in which they were spoken that told the young Countess that he did not mean to come, for there appeared in her eyes the strange gleam that for the moment robbed them of their beauty. She inclined her head and turned to join her mother. As she did so the rose dropped, quite by accident, from her hand, and lay upon the ground without being perceived by her.

Michael remained standing in the same spot, but a covetous glance fell upon the flower that had but now been in her hand. The delicate half-opened bud lay at his feet, rosy and fragrant, and just before him shimmered the blossoms of the Dionea, that kill their prisoners in intoxicating perfume.

The young officer's hand involuntarily sought the earth, and a hasty glance was cast at the group across the conservatory to discover whether he were observed. He encountered the gaze of a pair of eyes riveted upon him, expectant, exultant; he must bow. In an instant he stood erect, and as he stepped aside he trod upon the rose, and the delicate flower died beneath his heel.

Countess Hertha fanned herself violently, as if the heat had suddenly grown stifling, but Colonel Reval, who had just finished his conversation, said, "We really must leave the Countess to entire repose for a while. Come, my dear Rodenberg."

They took leave of the ladies and returned to the crowded rooms, went from the quiet, cool, fragrant conservatory, with its soft, dim light, into the heat and brilliancy, the hum and stir of society. And yet Michael breathed more freely, as if issuing from a stifling atmosphere into the open air.

Hans Wehlau, gliding upon the stream of social life, no sooner espied his friend than he took his arm and drew him aside to ask, "Have you seen the Countesses Steinrück, our watering-place acquaintances? They are here."

"I know it," Michael replied, laconically. "I spoke to them just now."

"Really? Where have you been hiding yourself? You're bored again, as usual, in society. I am enjoying myself extremely, and I have been presented to everybody."

"Also as usual. You must represent your father to-day; every one wishes to know the son of the distinguished scientist, since he himself—"

"Are you at it too?" Hans interrupted him, petulantly. "At least twenty times to-day I have been introduced and questioned as celebrity number two, since celebrity number one is not present. They have goaded me with my father's distinction until I am desperate."

"Hans, if your father could hear you!" Michael said, reproachfully.

"I can't help it. Every other man has at least an individuality of his own, something subjective. I am 'the son of our distinguished,' and so forth, and I am nothing more. As such I am introduced, flattered, distinguished if you choose; but it's terrible to run about forever as only something relative."

The young officer smiled. "Well, you are on the way to change it all. Probably in future it will be 'the distinguished artist, Hans Wehlau, whose father has rendered such service,' and so forth."

"In that case, I will assuredly forgive my father his fame. And so you have spoken to the Steinrück ladies. What a surprise it was to find them here when we thought them in Berkheim! The Countess mother very kindly invited me, or rather both of us, to the castle, and I accepted, of course. We will call at Steinrück together, eh?"

"No; I shall not go there," Michael replied.

"But why not, in heaven's name?"

"Because I have no inducement, and feel no desire to make one of the Steinrück circle. The tone that prevails there is notorious. Every one without a title must be constantly under arms if he would maintain his position there."

"Well, since the science of war is your profession, it would afford you a good opportunity for study. For my part, I find it very tiresome to be forever under arms like you and my father, who always feels obliged to vindicate his principles in his intercourse with the aristocracy. I amuse myself without principles of any kind, and always ground arms before the ladies. Be reasonable, Michael, and come with me."

"No!"

"Very well; let it alone, then! There is nothing to be done with you when once you take a notion into that obstinate head of yours, as I found out long ago; but I shall certainly not throw away my opportunity for seeing again that golden-haired fairy, the Countess Hertha. I suppose you never even noticed how captivating, how bewitching she is to-night in that cloud of silk and lace; the very embodiment of all loveliness."

"I certainly think the Countess beautiful, but—"

"You only think her so?" Hans interrupted him, indignantly. "Indeed? And you begin to criticise her with your 'but.' Let me tell you, Michael, that I have unbounded respect for you; in fact, you have been so long held up to me by my father as a model in every sense, that your superiority has become a thorn in my flesh. But when there is any question of women and women's loveliness, please hold your tongue; you know nothing about them or it, and are no better than what you once were,—a blockhead!"

With these words, uttered half in jest, half indignantly, he left his friend and joined a group of young people at a distance. Michael wandered in an opposite direction, looking stern and gloomy enough.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the room, Colonel Reval was talking with Count Steinrück. They had withdrawn into a small bow-window shut off from the room by a half-drawn *portière*, and Reval was saying, "I should like to call your Excellency's attention to this young officer. You will soon admit him to be in every way worthy your regard."

"I am sure of it, since you recommend him so warmly," replied Steinrück. "You are usually chary of such praise. Did he serve in your regiment from the beginning?"

"Yes. I noticed him first in the Danish war. Although the youngest lieutenant in the regiment, he contrived with a handful of men to capture a position which had until then resisted all attack, and which was of the greatest importance, and the way in which he performed this feat showed as much energy as presence of mind. In the last campaign he was my adjutant, and now he has just been ordered upon the general's staff in consequence of an admirable treatise; you may have seen it, your

Excellency, since it discusses a point upon which you lately expressed yourself very emphatically, and it was signed with the writer's name."

"Lieutenant Rodenberg; I remember," the general said, thoughtfully. The name always affected him painfully, but did not arrest his attention, since it was a frequent one in the army. There was a Colonel Rodenberg who had three sons in the service, and the Count had so fully made up his mind that the young officer in question was one of these that he judged it superfluous to make any inquiries about him.

"I know the treatise," he continued. "It betokens an unusual degree of talent, and would have secured my regard for its author, even without your warm recommendation; and, since you bear such brilliant testimony to his capacity in other respects—"

"Rodenberg is every way trustworthy; he maintains, it is true, rather an isolated position among his comrades; his unsocial disposition and his reserve make him but few friends, but he is universally respected."

"That suffices," declared Steinrück, who listened with evident interest. "He who is ambitious and has a high aim in view rarely finds time to be popular. I like natures which rely entirely upon themselves. I understand them; in my youth I resembled them."

"Here he is! His Excellency wishes to make your acquaintance, my dear Rodenberg," said the colonel, beckoning Michael to approach. He introduced him in due form, and then mingled with his other guests, leaving his favourite to complete the impression already made upon the general by the late conversation.

Michael confronted the man whom he had seen but once, and that ten years before, but whose image had remained ineffaceably impressed upon his memory, connected as it was with the bitterest experience of his life.

Count Michael Steinrück had already passed his seventieth year, but he was one of those whom time seems afraid to attack, and the years which are wont to bring decay found him still erect and strong as in the prime of life. His hair and beard were silvered, but that was the only change wrought by the last ten years. There was scarcely an added wrinkle upon the proud, resolute features, the eyes were still keen and fiery, and the carriage was as imposing as ever, betraying in every gesture the habit of command.

His iron constitution, strengthened and hardened as it had been by every kind of physical and mental exercise, maintained in old age a youthful vigour which many a young man might have envied.

The general scanned the young officer keenly, and the result of his examination was evidently a favourable one. He liked this strong, manly carriage, this grave repose of expression betokening mental discipline, and he opened the conversation with more geniality than was his wont. "Colonel Reval has recommended you to me very warmly, Lieutenant Rodenberg, and I value his judgment highly. You have been his adjutant?"

"I have, your Excellency."

Steinrück's attention was aroused, there was something familiar in that tone of voice, he seemed to have heard it before, and yet the young man was an utter stranger to him. He began to talk of military matters, putting frequent questions upon various topics, but Michael underwent excellently well this rigid examination in a conversational form. His replies, to be sure, were monosyllabic, not a word was uttered that was not absolutely necessary, but they were clear and to the point, perfectly in accordance with the taste of the general, who became more and more convinced that the colonel had not said too much. Count Steinrück was, indeed, feared on account of his severity, but he was strictly just whenever he met with merit or talent, and he even condescended to praise this young officer who was evidently most deserving.

"A great career is open to you," he said, at the close of the interview. "You stand on the first step of the ladder, and the ascent lies with yourself. I hear that you distinguished yourself in the field while still very young, and your latest work proves that you can do more than merely slash about with

a sword. I shall be glad to see you fulfil the promise you give; we have need of such vigorous young natures. I shall remember you, Lieutenant Rodenberg. What is your first name?"

"Michael."

The general started at this rather uncommon name; a strange suspicion flashed upon his mind, only, however, to be banished instantly; but again he scanned keenly the features of the man before him. "You are a son of Colonel Rodenberg, commanding officer in W—?"

"No, your Excellency."

"Related to him, probably?"

"No, your Excellency, I am not acquainted either with the colonel or with his family."

"What is your father's profession?"

"My father has been dead for many years."

"And your mother?"

"Dead also."

A pause of a few seconds ensued: the Count's eyes were riveted upon the young officer's face; at last he asked, slowly, "And where,—where did you pass your early youth?"

"In a forest lodge in the neighbourhood of Saint Michael."

The general recoiled; the revelation, which during the last few moments he had indeed divined, came upon him like a blow.

"It is you? Impossible!" he fairly gasped.

"What was your Excellency pleased to observe?" Michael asked, in an icy tone. He stood motionless in a strictly respectful attitude, but his eyes flashed, and now Steinrück recognized those eyes. He had seen them once before flashing just as fiercely when he had heaped unmerited disgrace upon the boy; they had just the same expression now as then.

But Count Steinrück did not lose his self-possession even at such a moment. He had collected himself in an instant, and said in the old imperious tone, "No matter! Let the past be past. I see Lieutenant Rodenberg to-day for the first time. I recall neither the praise which I bestowed upon you, nor the hopes that I expressed with regard to your future. You may count now, as before, upon my good will."

"I thank your Excellency," Michael rejoined, as coldly as possible. "It suffices me to hear from your own lips that I am, at least, fit for something in the world. I have made my way *alone*, and shall pursue it alone."

The general's brow grew dark. He had been willing to forget magnanimously, and had thought to achieve great things by this reluctant acknowledgment, and now his advances were rejected in the bluntest manner. "Haughty enough!" he said, in a tone that was almost menacing. "You would do well to bridle this untamed pride. Injustice was once done you, and that may excuse your reply. I will forget that I have heard it. You will surely come to a better state of mind."

"Has your Excellency any further commands for me?"

"No!"

An angry glance was cast at the young officer who dared to leave his general's presence without awaiting his dismissal, but Michael appeared to consider as such that 'no,' and with a salute he turned and walked away.

The general, stern and mute, looked after him. He could scarcely believe his eyes. He had, indeed, been informed that the 'good-for-nothing boy' had run away from his foster-father, and had never returned, doubtless from fear of punishment. He had not thought it worth the trouble to institute a search for the fugitive. If the fellow had vanished, so much the better; they were rid of him, and with him of the last reminder of the family tragedy that must be buried forever; he would always have been in the way. Sometimes, indeed, there was a shadow of dread in his mind lest the fellow should some day emerge from disgrace and misery and make use of his connection with the family, which

could not be denied, to extort money; but they had got rid of the father when he had tried that game, and they could likewise get rid of the son. Count Michael was not the man to be afraid of shadows.

And now the vanished boy had indeed emerged again, but in the very sphere to which the Count's family belonged. He was pronounced one of those who are sure to rise without foreign aid by their own talent and energy, and he had dared to reject the patronage offered him, grudgingly enough, but still offered. Why, it almost looked as if *he* now wished to disown his mother's family.

The Count's brow was still dark when he rejoined the other guests. Hertha and her mother had just returned to the drawing-room, and the young lady instantly became the centre of attraction. All crowded round her to do her homage. Hans Wehlau actually swept like a comet through the rooms to get near her, and even Steinrück's gloomy brow cleared as his glance rested upon his lovely ward.

Lieutenant Rodenberg alone appeared not to observe the entrance of the ladies. He stood apart, conversing with an old gentleman who discoursed freely upon the disagreeable summer that had passed, and the delightful autumn that had begun, and in whose remarks Michael appeared to take a deep interest. But now, and then he cast at the circle, which he forbore to approach, a glance as filled with longing as had been that with which he had looked at the rose at his feet in the conservatory; and when the garrulous old gentleman at last left him, he muttered to himself, "'Blockhead!' I wish I had remained one!"

Count Michael Steinrück occupied a very influential position in the capital. Raised to the rank of general at the beginning of the last campaign, he had proved himself one of the most capable of commanders, and his voice had great weight in military affairs.

Six years previously he had lost his only son, who was attached to the German embassy in Paris, and since then his daughter-in-law and his grandson had lived beneath his roof. The latter had originally, by his grandfather's desire, or rather command, been destined for the army. Count Michael had been resolved to carry out his plan in opposition to the wishes of the boy's parents, but he had been unable to do so. Raoul, who was in fact a delicate boy, sickened just at the time when a final decision with regard to his future career was absolutely necessary, and the physicians declared unanimously that he was unequal to the duties of the military profession. They referred to the father's already incipient consumption of the lungs, the germ of which might develop in the son unless great care were taken, and this son was the last and sole scion of an ancient line. These considerations at last prevailed with Count Michael, but he had never yet overcome his regret at the disappointment of his dearest hopes, especially since Raoul, when once the critical period was past, had bloomed out in perfect health and strength. After completing his studies at a German university he had entered the service of the government, and was at present in the Foreign Office, where, indeed, on account of his youth, he occupied a subordinate position.

The general, who had now been in possession of Steinrück for ten years, was still faithful to his deceased cousin's traditions, and regularly spent some weeks there during the hunting season, his military duties allowing him no more extended leave. His daughter-in-law and his grandson usually accompanied him upon these visits, when the castle was thrown open, guests were received, hunts were instituted, and the desolate old mountain castle resounded with life and gayety for a short time, after which it relapsed into its usual silence and solitude.

It was the morning after Count Raoul's arrival. He was in his mother's room, and the pair were engaged in an earnest conversation, the subject of which, however, appeared to be far from pleasant, for both mother and son looked annoyed.

Countess Hortense Steinrück had been a distinguished beauty, and, mother though she were of a grown son, she was still a very lovely woman. She perfectly understood how to heighten her beauty by the art of dress, which did much to conceal her years. There was a charm beyond that of youth in her intelligent face, with its dark, lively eyes, and her matronly figure was still extremely graceful.

Raoul was exceedingly like his mother, whose beauty he had inherited; in his slender youthful figure there was nothing to remind one of his father or his grandfather, or of the race of Steinrücks.

He had a fine head, crowned with dark curls, a broad brow, and dark, eloquent eyes, but the fire lying hidden in their depths could leap up in an instant like a consuming flame, and even in moments of quiet conversation there was sometimes a hot devouring glow in them. Unquestionable as was the young Count's beauty, there was something veiled and demonic about it, which, however, only made it more attractive.

"Then he sent for you yesterday evening?" Hortense said, in a tone of displeasure. "I knew that a storm was brewing and tried to avert it, but I did not suppose that it would burst forth on your first evening."

"Yes, my grandfather was extremely ungracious," said Raoul, also in high displeasure. "He took me to task about my follies as if they had been state offences. I had confessed all to you, mamma, and hoped for your advocacy."

"My advocacy?" the Countess repeated, bitterly. "You ought to know how powerless I am when you are under discussion. What can maternal love and maternal right avail with a man who is accustomed ruthlessly to subdue everything to his will, and to break what will not bend? I have suffered intensely from your father's being so absolutely dependent that I continue to be so after his death. I have no property of my own, and this dependence constitutes a fetter that is often galling enough."

"You are wrong, mamma," Raoul interposed. "My grandfather does not control me through our pecuniary dependence upon him, but by his personal characteristics. There is something in his eye, in his voice, that I cannot defy. I can set myself in opposition to all the world, but not to him."

"Yes, he has schooled you admirably. This is the result of an education designed to rob me of all influence with you, and to attach you solely to himself. You are impressed by his tone of command, his imperious air, while to me they merely represent the tyranny to which I have been forced to submit ever since my marriage. But it cannot last forever."

She breathed a sigh of relief as she uttered the last words. Raoul made no reply; he leaned his head on his hand and looked down.

"I wrote you that you would find Hertha and her mother here," the Countess began again. "I was quite surprised by the change in Hertha; since we saw her years ago she has developed into a beauty of the first class. Do you not think so?"

"Yes, she is very beautiful, and thoroughly spoiled,—full of caprices. I found that out yesterday."

Hortense slightly shrugged her shoulders. "She is conscious of being a wealthy heiress, and, moreover, she is the only child of a very weak mother, who has no will of her own. You have a will, however, Raoul, and will know how to treat your future wife, I do not doubt. Upon this point I find myself, strangely enough, absolutely in harmony with your grandfather, who wishes to see you in possession of all the Steinrück estates. The income of the elder line is not very large, and little more was left to your grandfather than a hunting castle, while Hertha, on the other hand, is heiress to all the other property, and must one day inherit her mother's very large jointure. Moreover, you and she are the two last scions of the Steinrück race, and a union between you two is every way desirable."

"Yes, if family considerations alone were in question. You took good care to impress this upon us when we were but children," Raoul said, with a tinge of bitterness in his tone that did not escape his mother, who looked at him in surprise.

"I should suppose that you would have every reason to be satisfied with this family arrangement. It contents even me, and my aspirations for you are lofty. You were always seemingly in favor of it. What is it that clouds your brow to-day? Have you been so displeased by a mere caprice of Hertha's? I grant that she did not give you a very amiable reception yesterday, but that should not cause you to hesitate about entering upon the possession of a lovely wife and, with her, of a large fortune, which would make you the envy of thousands."

"It is not that, but I dislike resigning my freedom so soon."

"Freedom!" Hortense laughed bitterly. "Do you really dare to utter that word beneath this roof? Are you not weary of being treated at twenty-five like a boy for whom every step is prescribed? Of being scolded if your conduct does not please? Of having to entreat for the fulfilment of every reasonable desire, and of being obliged to submit humbly to an autocrat's refusal? Can you hesitate a moment to grasp the independence offered to you? Next year, according to the will, your grandfather's guardianship of Hertha is at an end, and she, and her husband with her, will enter into full possession of what is hers by right. Liberate yourself, Raoul, and me!"

"Mamma!" said the young Count, with a warning glance towards the door, but the excited woman went on, more passionately,—

"Yes, and me. For what is my life in this house but a perpetual struggle, and a perpetual defeat? Hitherto you have had no power to protect me from the thousand mortifications to which I have been subjected day after day; now you will have it,—it rests with yourself. I shall take refuge with you as soon as you are master of your own house."

Raoul arose with an angry gesture. His mother's passionate eloquence was not without its effect; it was plain that the picture which she drew of freedom and independence was very alluring to the young man, who had just suffered so keenly from his grandfather's severity. Nevertheless he hesitated to reply, and a struggle was evidently going on within him.

"You are right, mamma," he said at last, "perfectly right. I do not object at all, but if the affair is to be precipitated, as would seem at present—"

"You have every reason to rejoice. I do not understand you, Raoul. I cannot imagine— You are not entangled elsewhere?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the young Count, hastily, "nothing of the kind, I assure you, mamma."

His mother seemed but little relieved by this assertion, and was about to question him further, when the door was noiselessly opened, and the Countess's maid said, in an undertone,—

"His Excellency the general."

She had scarcely time to retire when the general appeared. He paused on the threshold for an instant, and looked inquiringly from mother to son. "Since when have the laws of etiquette been so strictly observed in our house?" he asked. "I am to be announced, I see, Hortense."

"I do not know why Marion announced you; she knows that such formality is quite superfluous."

"Certainly, if it were not ordered; her voice sounded as if raised in warning."

With these words Steinrück sat down beside his daughter-in-law, acknowledging by only a slight nod his grandson's 'good-morning.' Mother and son had hitherto spoken in French, but now they instantly had recourse to German; and the general continued: "I came to ask for an explanation, Hortense. I have just heard that two rooms in the castle have been prepared for guests by your orders. I thought our relatives were to be our only guests this year. Whom have you invited?"

"It is only for a brief visit, papa," the Countess explained. "Some acquaintances of ours have been staying at Wildbad, and on their way home wish to spend two or three days with us. I heard of their coming only this morning, or I should have told you."

"Indeed! I should like to know whom you expect."

"Henri de Clermont and his sister."

"I am sorry that I was not consulted about this invitation,—I should not have allowed it."

"It was given for Raoul's sake, at his particular request."

"No matter for that. I do not wish the Clermonts admitted to our circle."

Raoul started at this decided expression of disapproval, and his face flushed darkly. "Excuse me, sir, but Henri and his sister were at our house several times last winter."

"To see your mother. I have nothing to say with regard to those whom she personally receives, but this visit to Steinrück, when we are here a family party, would betoken a degree of intimacy which I do not desire, and therefore it must not take place."

"Impossible!" Hortense rejoined, with nervous irritability. "I have sent the invitation now, and it cannot be recalled."

"Why not? You can write simply that you are not well, and feel quite unequal to the duties of a hostess."

"That would make us perfectly ridiculous!" exclaimed Raoul. "The pretext would be seen through immediately; it would be an insult to Henri and his sister."

"I think so too," Hortense added.

"There I must differ from both of you," the general said, with emphasis; "and in this case I am the only one to be consulted. It is for you to recall the invitation as seems to you best. Recalled it must be, for I will not receive the Clermonts in my castle."

This was said in the commanding tone that always provoked the passionate woman. She arose angrily. "Am I to be compelled to insult my son's friends? To be sure they belong to my country, to my people, and that excludes them from this house. My Love for my home has always been cast up to me as a reproach, and Raoul's preference for it is regarded as a crime. Since his father's death he has never been allowed to visit France; his associates are selected for him as if he were a school-boy; he hardly dares to correspond with my relatives. But I am weary of this slavery; at last I will—"

"Raoul, leave the room," Steinrück interrupted her. He had not risen from his seat, and he had preserved an unmoved countenance, but a frown was gathering on his brow.

"Stay, Raoul!" Hortense cried, passionately, "stay with your mother!"

The young Count certainly seemed inclined to espouse his mother's cause. He walked to her side as if to protect her and to defy his grandfather, but at this instant the general also arose, and his eyes flashed. "You heard what I said! Go!"

There was such command in his tone that it put an end to Raoul's resistance. He found it absolutely impossible to disobey those eyes and that voice; he hesitated for an instant, but at an imperious gesture from his grandfather he complied and left the room.

"I do not desire that Raoul should be a witness to these scenes, which are unfortunately so frequent between us," Steinrück said, coldly, turning to his daughter-in-law. "Now we are alone, what have you to say?"

If anything could irritate the angry woman still more, it was this cold, grave manner which impressed her as contempt. She was beside herself with indignation. "I will maintain my rights!" she exclaimed. "I will rebel against the tyranny that oppresses both my son and myself. It is an insult to me to compel me to recall my invitation to the Clermonts, and it shall not be done, let the worst come to the worst!"

"I advise you, Hortense, not to go so far; you might repent it," the Count rejoined, and he was no longer self-possessed; his voice sounded stern and menacing. "If you want the plain truth you shall have it. Yes, it is of the first importance that Raoul should be withdrawn from influences and associations which I disapprove for my grandson. I relied upon Albrecht's repeated solemn assurance that the boy should have a German education. Upon your brief infrequent visits I could not satisfy myself upon this point, and unfortunately the lad was schooled for those visits. Not until after my son's death did I discover that he had blindly acceded to your will in this matter, and had intentionally deceived me."

"Would you reproach my husband in his grave?"

"Even there I cannot spare him the reproach with which I should have heaped him living. He yielded when he never should have yielded. Raoul was a stranger in his native land, ignorant of its history, of its customs, of everything that ought to have been dear and sacred to him. He was rooted deep in foreign soil. The revelation made to me when you returned with him to my house forced me to interfere, and with energy. It was high time, if it were not too late."

"I assuredly did not return to your house voluntarily." The Countess's voice was sharp and bitter. "I would have gone to my brother, but you laid claim to Raoul, you took him from me by virtue of your guardianship, and I could not be separated from my child. If I could have taken him with me—"

"And have made a thorough Montigny of him," Steinrück completed her sentence. "It would not have been difficult; there is in him only too much of you and of yours. I look in vain to find traces of my blood in the boy, but disown this blood he never shall. You know me in this regard, and Raoul will learn to know me. Woe be to him if he ever forgets the name he bears or that he belongs to a German race!"

He spoke in an undertone, but there was so terrible a menace in his voice that Hortense shuddered. She knew he was in terrible earnest, and, conscious that she was again defeated in the old conflict, she took refuge in tears, and burst into a passionate fit of sobbing.

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