

ELIZABETH VON ARNIM

THE PRINCESS PRISCILLA'S
FORTNIGHT

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"Oft habe ich die Welt durchwandert, und habe immer gesehen, wie das Grosse am Kleinlichen scheitert, und das Edle von dem ätzenden Gift des Alltäglichen zerfressen wird."

FRITZING, "Erlebtes und Erlittenes."

I

Her Grand Ducal Highness the Princess Priscilla of Lothen-Kunitz was up to the age of twenty-one a most promising young lady. She was not only poetic in appearance beyond the habit of princesses but she was also of graceful and appropriate behaviour. She did what she was told; or, more valuable, she did what was expected of her without being told. Her father, in his youth and middle age a fiery man, now an irritable old gentleman who liked good food and insisted on strictest etiquette, was proud of her on those occasions when she happened to cross his mind. Her mother, by birth an English princess of an originality uncomfortable and unexpected in a royal lady that continued to the end of her life to crop up at disconcerting moments, died when Priscilla was sixteen. Her sisters, one older and one younger than herself, were both far less pleasing to look upon than she was, and much more difficult to manage; yet each married a suitable prince and each became a credit to her House, while as for Priscilla,—well, as for Priscilla, I propose to describe her dreadful conduct.

But first her appearance. She was well above the average height of woman; a desirable thing in a princess, who, before everything, must impress the public with her dignity. She had a long pointed chin, and a sweet mouth with full lips that looked most kind. Her nose was not quite straight, one side of it being the least bit different from the other,—a slight crookedness that gave her face a charm absolutely beyond the reach of those whose features are what is known as chiselled. Her skin was of that fairness that freckles readily in hot summers or on winter days when the sun shines brightly on the snow, a delicate soft skin that is seen sometimes with golden eyelashes and eyebrows, and hair that is more red than gold. Priscilla had these eyelashes and eyebrows and this hair, and she had besides beautiful grey-blue eyes—calm pools of thought, the court poet called them, when her having a birthday compelled him to official raptures; and because everybody felt sure they were not really anything of the kind the poet's utterance was received with acclamations. Indeed, a princess who should possess such pools would be most undesirable—in Lothen-Kunitz nothing short of a calamity; for had they not had one already? It was what had been the matter with the deceased Grand Duchess; she would think, and no one could stop her, and her life in consequence was a burden to herself and to everybody else at her court. Priscilla, however, was very silent. She had never expressed an opinion, and the inference was that she had no opinion to express. She had not criticized, she had not argued, she had been tractable, obedient, meek. Yet her sisters, who had often criticized and argued, and who had rarely been obedient and never meek, became as I have said the wives of appropriate princes, while Priscilla,—well, he who runs may read what it was that Priscilla became.

But first as to where she lived. The Grand Duchy of Lothen-Kunitz lies in the south of Europe; that smiling region of fruitful plains, forest-clothed hills, and broad rivers. It is one of the first places Spring stops at on her way up from Italy; and Autumn, coming down from the north sunburnt, fruit-laden, and blest, goes slowly when she reaches it, lingering there with her serenity and ripeness, her calm skies and her windless days long after the Saxons and Prussians have lit their stoves and got out their furs. There figs can be eaten off the trees in one's garden, and vineyards glow on the hillsides. There the people are Catholics, and the Protestant pastor casts no shadow of a black gown across life. There as you walk along the white roads, you pass the image of the dead Christ by the wayside; mute reminder to those who would otherwise forget of the beauty of pitifulness and love. And there, so near is Kunitz to the soul of things, you may any morning get into the train after breakfast and in the afternoon find yourself drinking coffee in the cool colonnades of the Piazza San Marco at Venice.

Kunitz is the capital of the duchy, and the palace is built on a hill. It is one of those piled-up buildings of many windows and turrets and battlements on which the tourist gazes from below as at the realization of a childhood's dream. A branch of the river Loth winds round the base of the hill, separating the ducal family from the red-roofed town along its other bank. Kunitz stretches right round the hill, lying clasped about its castle like a necklet of ancient stones. At the foot of the castle

walls the ducal orchards and kitchen gardens begin, continuing down to the water's edge and clothing the base of the hill in a garment of blossom and fruit. No fairer sight is to be seen than the glimpse of these grey walls and turrets rising out of a cloud of blossom to be had by him who shall stand in the market place of Kunitz and look eastward up the narrow street on a May morning; and if he who gazes is a dreamer he could easily imagine that where the setting of life is so lovely its days must of necessity be each like a jewel, of perfect brightness and beauty.

The Princess Priscilla, however, knew better. To her unfortunately the life within the walls seemed of a quite blatant vulgarity; pervaded by lacqueys, by officials of every kind and degree, by too much food, too many clothes, by waste, by a feverish frittering away of time, by a hideous want of privacy, by a dreariness unutterable. To her it was a perpetual behaving according to the ideas officials had formed as to the conduct to be expected of princesses, a perpetual pretending not to see that the service offered was sheerest lip-service, a perpetual shutting of the eyes to hypocrisy and grasping selfishness. Conceive, you tourist full of illusions standing free down there in the market place, the frightfulness of never being alone a moment from the time you get out of bed to the time you get into it again. Conceive the deadly patience needed to stand passive and be talked to, amused, taken care of, all day long for years. Conceive the intolerableness, if you are at all sensitive, of being watched by eyes so sharp and prying, so eager to note the least change of expression and to use the conclusions drawn for personal ends that nothing, absolutely nothing, escapes them. Priscilla's sisters took all these things as a matter of course, did not care in the least how keenly they were watched and talked over, never wanted to be alone, liked being fussed over by their ladies-in-waiting. They, happy girls, had thick skins. But Priscilla was a dreamer of dreams, a poet who never wrote poems, but whose soul though inarticulate was none the less saturated with the desires and loves from which poems are born. She, like her sisters, had actually known no other states; but then she dreamed of them continuously, she desired them continuously, she read of them continuously; and though there was only one person who knew she did these things I suppose one person is enough in the way of encouragement if your mind is bent on rebellion. This old person, cause of all the mischief that followed, for without his help I do not see what Priscilla could have done, was the ducal librarian—*Hofbibliothekar*, head, and practically master of the wonderful collection of books and manuscripts whose mere catalogue made learned mouths in distant parts of Europe water and learned lungs sigh in hopeless envy. He too had officials under him, but they were unlike the others: meek youths, studious and short-sighted, whose business as far as Priscilla could see was to bow themselves out silently whenever she and her lady-in-waiting came in. The librarian's name was Fritzing; plain Herr Fritzing originally, but gradually by various stages at last arrived at the dignity and sonorousness of Herr Geheimarchivrath Fritzing. The Grand Duke indeed had proposed to ennoble him after he had successfully taught Priscilla English grammar, but Fritzing, whose spirit dwelt among the Greeks, could not be brought to see any desirability in such a step. Priscilla called him Fritzzi when her lady-in-waiting dozed; dearest Fritzzi sometimes even, in the heat of protest or persuasion. But afterwards, leaving the room as solemnly as she had come in, followed by her wide-awake attendant, she would nod a formally gracious "Good afternoon, Herr Geheimrath," for all the world as though she had been talking that way the whole time. The Countess (her lady-in-waiting was the Countess Irmgard von Disthal, an ample slow lady, the unmarried daughter of a noble house, about fifty at this time, and luckily—or unluckily—for Priscilla, a great lover of much food and its resultant deep slumbers) would bow in her turn in as stately a manner as her bulk permitted, and with a frigidity so pronounced that in any one less skilled in shades of deportment it would have resembled with a singular completeness a sniff of scorn. Her frigidity was perfectly justified. Was she not a *hochgeboren*, a member of an ancient house, of luminous pedigree as far back as one could possibly see? And was he not the son of an obscure Westphalian farmer, a person who in his youth had sat barefoot watching pigs? It is true he had learning, and culture, and a big head with plenty of brains in it, and the Countess Disthal had a small head, hardly any brains, no soul to speak of, and no education. This, I say, is true; but

it is also neither here nor there. The Countess was the Countess, and Fritzing was a nobody, and the condescension she showed him was far more grand ducal than anything in that way that Priscilla could or ever did produce.

Fritzing, unusually gifted, and enterprising from the first—which explains the gulf between pig-watching and *Hofbibliothekar*—had spent ten years in Paris and twenty in England in various capacities, but always climbing higher in the world of intellect, and had come during this climbing to speak English quite as well as most Englishmen, if in a statelier, Johnsonian manner. At fifty he began his career in Kunitz, and being a lover of children took over the English education of the three princesses; and now that they had long since learned all they cared to know, and in Priscilla's case all of grammar at least that he had to teach, he invented a talent for drawing in Priscilla, who could not draw a straight line, much less a curved one, so that she should still be able to come to the library as often as she chose on the pretext of taking a drawing-lesson. The Grand Duke's idea about his daughters was that they should know a little of everything and nothing too well; and if Priscilla had said she wanted to study Shakespeare with the librarian he would have angrily forbidden it. Had she not had ten years for studying Shakespeare? To go on longer than that would mean that she was eager, and the Grand Duke loathed an eager woman.

But he had nothing to say against a little drawing; and it was during the drawing-lessons of the summer Priscilla was twenty-one that the Countess Disthal slept so peacefully. The summer was hot, and the vast room cool and quiet. The time was three o'clock—immediately, that is, after luncheon. Through the narrow open windows sweet airs and scents came in from the bright world outside. Sometimes a bee would wander up from the fruit-gardens below, and lazily drone round shady corners. Sometimes a flock of pigeons rose swiftly in front of the windows, with a flash of shining wings. Every quarter of an hour the cathedral clock down in the town sent up its slow chime. Voices of people boating on the river floated up too, softened to melodiousness. Down at the foot of the hill the red roofs of the town glistened in the sun. Beyond them lay the sweltering cornfields. Beyond them forests and villages. Beyond them a blue line of hills. Beyond them, said Priscilla to herself, freedom. She sat in her white dress at a table in one of the deep windows, her head on its long slender neck, where the little rings of red-gold hair curled so prettily, bent over the drawing-board, her voice murmuring ceaselessly, for time was short and she had a great many things to say. At her side sat Fritzing, listening and answering. Far away in the coolest, shadiest corner of the room slumbered the Countess. She was lulled by the murmured talk as sweetly as by the drone of the bee.

"Your Grand Ducal Highness receives many criticisms and much advice on the subject of drawing from the Herr Geheimrath?" she said one day, after a lesson during which she had been drowsily aware of much talk.

"The Herr Geheimrath is most conscientious," said Priscilla in the stately, it-has-nothing-to-do-with-you sort of tone she found most effectual with the Countess; but she added a request under her breath that the *lieber Gott* might forgive her, for she knew she had told a fib.

Indeed, the last thing that Fritzing was at this convulsed period of his life was what his master would have called conscientious. Was he not encouraging the strangest, wickedest, wildest ideas in the Princess? Strange and wicked and wild that is from the grand ducal point of view, for to Priscilla they seemed all sweetness and light. Fritzing had a perfect horror of the Grand Duke. He was everything that Fritzing, lean man of learning, most detested. The pleasantest fashion of describing the Grand Duke will be simply to say that he was in all things, both of mind and body, the exact opposite of Fritzing. Fritzing was a man who spent his time ignoring his body and digging away at his mind. You know the bony aspect of such men. Hardly ever is there much flesh on them; and though they are often ugly enough, their spirit blazes at you out of wonderful eyes. I call him old Fritzing, for he was sixty. To me he seemed old; to Priscilla at twenty he seemed coeval with pyramids and kindred hoarinesses; while to all those persons who were sixty-one he did not seem old at all. Only two things could have kept this restless soul chained to the service of the Grand Duke, and those two things

were the unique library and Priscilla. For the rest, his life at Kunitz revolted him. He loathed the etiquette and the fuss and the intrigues of the castle. He loathed each separate lady-in-waiting, and every one of the male officials. He loathed the vulgar abundance and inordinate length and frequency of the meals, when down in the town he knew there were people a-hungered. He loathed the lacqueys with a quite peculiar loathing, scowling at them from under angry eyebrows as he passed from his apartment to the library; yet such is the power of an independent and scornful spirit that though they had heard all about Westphalia and the pig-days never once had they, who made insolence their study, dared be rude to him.

Priscilla wanted to run away. This, I believe, is considered an awful thing to do even if you are only a housemaid or somebody's wife. If it were not considered awful, placed by the world high up on its list of Utter Unforgivablenesses, there is, I suppose, not a woman who would not at some time or other have run. She might come back, but she would surely have gone. So bad is it held to be that even a housemaid who runs is unfailingly pursued by maledictions more or less definite according to the education of those she has run from; and a wife who runs is pursued by social ruin, it being taken for granted that she did not run alone. I know at least two wives who did run alone. Far from wanting yet another burden added to them by adding to their lives yet another man, they were anxiously endeavouring to get as far as might be from the man they had got already. The world, foul hag with the downcast eyes and lascivious lips, could not believe it possible, and was quick to draw its dark mantle of disgrace over their shrinking heads. One of them, unable to bear this, asked her husband's pardon. She was a weak spirit, and now lives prostrate days, crushed beneath the unchanging horror of a husband's free forgiveness. The other took a cottage and laughed at the world. Was she not happy at last, and happy in the right way? I go to see her sometimes, and we eat the cabbages she has grown herself. Strange how the disillusioned find their peace in cabbages.

Priscilla, then, wanted to run away. What is awful in a housemaid and in anybody's wife became in her case stupendous. The spirit that could resolve it, decide to do it without being dragged to it by such things as love or passion, calmly looking the risks and losses in the face, and daring everything to free itself, was, it must be conceded, at least worthy of respect. Fritzing thought it worthy of adoration; the divinest spirit that had ever burned within a woman. He did not say so. On the contrary, he was frightened, and tried angrily, passionately, to dissuade. Yet he knew that if she wavered he would never forgive her; she would drop at once from her high estate into those depths in his opinion where the dull average of both sexes sprawled for ever in indiscriminate heaps. Priscilla never dreamed of wavering. She, most poetic of princesses, made apparently of ivory and amber, outwardly so cool and serene and gentle, was inwardly on fire. The fire, I should add, burnt with a very white flame. Nothing in the shape of a young man had ever had the stoking of it. It was that whitest of flames that leaps highest at the thought of abstractions—freedom, beauty of life, simplicity, and the rest. This, I would remark, is a most rare light to find burning in a woman's breast. What she was, however, Fritzing had made her. True the material had been extraordinarily good, and for ten years he had done as he liked with it. Beginning with the simpler poems of Wordsworth—he detested them, but they were better than soiling her soul with Longfellow and Mrs. Hemans—those lessons in English literature, meant by the authorities to be as innocuous to her as to her sisters, had opened her eyes in a way nothing else could have done to the width of the world and the littleness of Kunitz. With that good teacher, as eager to lead as she to follow, she wandered down the splendid walks of culture, met there the best people of all ages, communed with mighty souls, heard how they talked, saw how they lived, and none, not one, lived and talked as they lived and talked at Kunitz.

Imagine a girl influenced for ten years, ten of her softest most wax-like years, by a Fritzing, taught to love freedom, to see the beauty of plain things, of quietness, of the things appertaining to the spirit, taught to see how ignoble it is, how intensely, hopelessly vulgar to spend on one's own bodily comforts more than is exactly necessary, taught to see a vision of happiness possible only to those who look to their minds for their joys and not to their bodies, imagine how such a girl, hearing these

things every afternoon almost of her life, would be likely to regard the palace mornings and evenings, the ceremonies and publicity, all those hours spent as though she were a celebrated picture, forced everlastingly to stand in an attitude considered appropriate and smile while she was being looked at.

"No one," she said one day to Fritzing, "who hasn't himself been a princess can have the least idea of what it is like."

"Ma'am, it would be more correct to say herself in place of himself."

"Well, they can't," said Priscilla.

"Ma'am, to begin a sentence with the singular and continue it with the plural is an infraction of all known rules."

"But the sentiments, Fritzi—what do you think of the sentiments?"

"Alas, ma'am, they too are an infraction of rules."

"What is not in this place, I should like to know?" sighed Priscilla, her chin on her hand, her eyes on that distant line of hills beyond which, she told herself, lay freedom.

She had long ago left off saying it only to herself. I think she must have been about eighteen when she took to saying it aloud to Fritzing. At first, before he realized to what extent she was sick for freedom, he had painted in glowing colours the delights that lay on the other side of the hills, or for that matter on this side of them if you were alone and not a princess. Especially had he dwelt on the glories of life in England, glories attainable indeed only by the obscure such as he himself had been, and for ever impossible to those whom Fate obliges to travel in state carriages and special trains. Then he had come to scent danger and had grown wary; trying to put her off with generalities, such as the inability of human beings to fly from their own selves, and irrelevancies such as the amount of poverty and wretchedness to be observed in the east of London; refusing to discuss France, which she was always getting to as the first step towards England, except in as far as it was a rebellious country that didn't like kings; pointing out with no little temper that she had already seen England; and finishing by inquiring very snappily when her Grand Ducal Highness intended to go on with her drawing.

Now what Priscilla had seen of England had been the insides of Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle; of all insides surely the most august. To and from these she had been conveyed in closed carriages and royal trains, and there was so close a family likeness between them and Kunitz that to her extreme discomfort she had felt herself completely at home. Even the presence of the Countess Disthal had not been wanting. She therefore regarded this as not seeing England at all, and said so. Fritzing remarked tartly that it was a way of seeing it most English people would envy her; and she was so unable to believe him that she said Nonsense.

But lately her desires had taken definite shape so rapidly that he had come to dread the very word *hill* and turn cold at the name of England. He was being torn in different directions; for he was, you see, still trying to do what other people had decided was his duty, and till a man gives up doing that he will certainly be torn. How great would be the temptation to pause here and consider the mangled state of such a man, the wounds and weakness he will suffer from, and how his soul will have to limp through life, if it were not that I must get on with Priscilla.

One day, after many weeks of edging nearer to it, of going all round it yet never quite touching it, she took a deep breath and told him she had determined to run away. She added an order that he was to help her. With her most grand ducal air she merely informed, ordered, and forbade. What she forbade, of course, was the betrayal of her plans. "You may choose," she said, "between the Grand Duke and myself. If you tell him, I have done with you for ever."

Of course he chose Priscilla.

His agonies now were very great. Those last lacerations of conscience were terrific. Then, after nights spent striding, a sudden calm fell upon him. At length he could feel what he had always seen, that there could not be two duties for a man, that no man can serve two masters, that a man's one clear duty is to be in the possession of his soul and live the life it approves: in other and shorter words, instead of leading Priscilla, Priscilla was now leading him.

She did more than lead him; she drove him. The soul he had so carefully tended and helped to grow was now grown stronger than his own; for there was added to its natural strength the tremendous daring of absolute inexperience. What can be more inexperienced than a carefully guarded young princess? Priscilla's ignorance of the outside world was pathetic. He groaned over her plans—for it was she who planned and he who listened—and yet he loved them. She was a divine woman, he said to himself; the sweetest and noblest, he was certain, that the world would ever see.

Her plans were these:

First, that having had twenty-one years of life at the top of the social ladder she was now going to get down and spend the next twenty-one at the bottom of it. (Here she gave her reasons, and I will not stop to describe Fritzing's writhings as his own past teachings grinned at him through every word she said.)

Secondly, that the only way to get to the bottom being to run away from Kunitz, she was going to run.

Thirdly, that the best and nicest place for living at the bottom would be England. (Here she explained her conviction that beautiful things grow quite naturally round the bottom of ladders that cannot easily reach the top; flowers of self-sacrifice and love, of temperance, charity, godliness—delicate things, with roots that find their nourishment in common soil. You could not, said Priscilla, expect soil at the top of ladders, could you? And as she felt that she too had roots full of potentialities, she must take them down to where their natural sustenance lay waiting.)

Fourthly, they were to live somewhere in the country in England, in the humblest way.

Fifthly, she was to be his daughter.

"Daughter?" cried Fritzing, bounding in his chair. "Your Grand Ducal Highness forgets I have friends in England, every one of whom is aware that I never had a wife."

"Niece, then," said Priscilla.

He gazed at her in silence, trying to imagine her his niece. He had two sisters, and they had stopped exactly at the point they were at when they helped him, barefoot, to watch Westphalian pigs. I do not mean that they had not ultimately left the little farm, gone into stockings, and married. It is their minds I am thinking of, and these had never budged. They were like their father, a doomed dullard; while Fritzing's mother, whom he resembled, had been a rather extraordinary woman in a rough and barbarous way. He found himself wholly unable to imagine either of his sisters the mother of this exquisite young lady.

These, then, baldly, were Priscilla's plans. The carrying of them out was left, she informed him, altogether to Fritzing. After having spent several anxious days, she told him, considering whether she ought to dye her hair black in order to escape recognition, or stay her own colour but disguise herself as a man and buy a golden beard, she had decided that these were questions Fritzing would settle better than she could. "I'd dye my hair at once," she said, "but what about my wretched eyelashes? Can one dye eyelashes?"

Fritzing thought not, and anyhow was decidedly of opinion that her eyelashes should not be tampered with; I think I have said that they were very lovely. He also entirely discouraged the idea of dressing as a man. "Your Grand Ducal Highness would only look like an extremely conspicuous boy," he assured her.

"I could wear a beard," said Priscilla.

But Fritzing was absolutely opposed to the beard.

As for the money part, she never thought of it. Money was a thing she never did think about. It also, then, was to be Fritzing's business. Possibly things might have gone on much longer as they were, with a great deal of planning and talking, and no doing, if an exceedingly desirable prince had not signified his intention of marrying Priscilla. This had been done before by quite a number of princes. They had, that is, not signified, but implored. On their knees would they have implored if their knees could have helped them. They were however all poor, and Priscilla and her sisters were

rich; and how foolish, said the Grand Duke, to marry poor men unless you are poor yourself. The Grand Duke, therefore, took these young men aside and crushed them, while Priscilla, indifferent, went on with her drawing. But now came this one who was so eminently desirable that he had no need to do more than merely signify. There had been much trouble and a great deal of delay in finding him a wife, for he had insisted on having a princess who should be both pretty and not his cousin. Europe did not seem to contain such a thing. Everybody was his cousin, except two or three young women whom he was rude enough to call ugly. The Kunitz princesses had been considered in their turn and set aside, for they too were cousins; and it seemed as if one of the most splendid thrones in Europe would either have to go queen-less or be sat upon by somebody plain, when fate brought the Prince to a great public ceremony in Kunitz, and he saw Priscilla and fell so violently in love with her that if she had been fifty times his cousin he would still have married her.

That same evening he signified his intention to the delighted Grand Duke, who immediately fell to an irrelevant praising of God.

"Bosh," said the Prince, in the nearest equivalent his mother-tongue provided.

This was very bad. Not, I mean, that the Prince should have said Bosh, for he was so great that there was not a Grand Duke in Europe to whom he might not have said it if he wanted to; but that Priscilla should have been in imminent danger of marriage. Among Fritzing's many preachings there had been one, often repeated in the strongest possible language, that of all existing contemptibilities the very most contemptible was for a woman to marry any one she did not love; and the peroration, also extremely forcible, had been an announcement that the prince did not exist who was fit to tie her shoestrings. This Priscilla took to be an exaggeration, for she had no very great notion of her shoestrings; but she did agree with the rest. The subject however was an indifferent one, her father never yet having asked her to marry anybody; and so long as he did not do so she need not, she thought, waste time thinking about it. Now the peril was upon her, suddenly, most unexpectedly, very menacingly. She knew there was no hope from the moment she saw her father's face quite distorted by delight. He took her hand and kissed it. To him she was already a queen. As usual she gave him the impression of behaving exactly as he could have wished. She certainly said very little, for she had long ago learned the art of being silent; but her very silences were somehow exquisite, and the Grand Duke thought her perfect. She gave him to understand almost without words that it was a great surprise, an immense honour, a huge compliment, but so sudden that she would be grateful to both himself and the Prince if nothing more need be said about it for a week or two—nothing, at least, till formal negotiations had been opened. "I saw him yesterday for the first time," she pleaded, "so naturally I am rather overwhelmed."

Privately she had thought, his eyes, which he had never taken off her, kind and pleasant; and if she had known of his having said Bosh who knows but that he might have had a chance? As it was, the moment she was alone she sent flying for Fritzing. "What," she said, "do you say to my marrying this man?"

"If you do, ma'am," said Fritzing, and his face seemed one blaze of white conviction, "you will undoubtedly be eternally lost."

II

They fled on bicycles in the dusk. The goddess Good Luck, who seems to have a predilection for sinners, helped them in a hundred ways. Without her they would certainly not have got far, for both were very ignorant of the art of running away. Once flight was decided on Fritzing planned elaborately and feverishly, got things thought out and arranged as well as he, poor harassed man, possibly could. But what in this law-bound world can sinners do without the help of Luck? She, amused and smiling dame, walked into the castle and smote the Countess Disthal with influenza, crushing her down helpless into her bed, and holding her there for days by the throat. While one hand was doing this, with the other she gaily swept the Grand Duke into East Prussia, a terrific distance, whither, all unaware of how he was being trifled with, he thought he was being swept by an irresistible desire to go, before the business of Priscilla's public betrothal should begin, and shoot the roebucks of a friend.

The Countess was thrust into her bed at noon of a Monday in October. At three the Grand Duke started for East Prussia, incognito in a motor—you know the difficulty news has in reaching persons in motors. At four one of Priscilla's maids, an obscure damsel who had been at the mercy of the others and was chosen because she hated them, tripped out of the castle with shining eyes and pockets heavy with bribes, and caused herself to be whisked away by the afternoon express to Cologne. At six, just as the castle guard was being relieved, two persons led their bicycles through the archway and down across the bridge. It was dark, and nobody recognized them. Fritzing was got up sportingly, almost waggishly—heaven knows his soul was not feeling waggish—as differently as possible from his usual sober clothes. Somehow he reminded Priscilla of a circus, and she found it extremely hard not to laugh. On his head he had a cap with ear-pieces that hid his grey hair; round his neck a gaudy handkerchief muffled well about his face; immense goggles cloaked the familiar overhanging eyebrows and deep-set eyes, goggles curiously at variance with the dapper briskness of his gaitered legs. The Princess was in ordinary blue serge, short and rather shabby, it having been subjected for hours daily during the past week to rough treatment by the maid now travelling to Cologne. As for her face and hair, they were completely hidden in the swathings of a motor-veil.

The sentinels stared rather as these two figures pushed their bicycles through the gates, and undoubtedly did for some time afterwards wonder who they could have been. The same thing happened down below on the bridge; but once over that and in the town all they had to do was to ride straight ahead. They were going to bicycle fifteen miles to Rühl, a small town with a railway station on the main line between Kunitz and Cologne. Express trains do not stop at Rühl, but there was a slow train at eight which would get them to Gerstein, the capital of the next duchy, by midnight. Here they would change into the Cologne express; here they would join the bribed maid; here luggage had been sent by Fritzing,—a neat bag for himself, and a neat box for his niece. The neat box was filled with neat garments suggested to him by the young lady in the shop in Gerstein where he had been two days before to buy them. She told him of many other articles which, she said, no lady's wardrobe could be considered complete without; and the distracted man, fearing the whole shop would presently be put into trunks and sent to the station to meet them, had ended by flinging down two notes for a hundred marks each and bidding her keep strictly within that limit. The young lady became very scornful. She told him that she had never heard of any one being clothed from head to foot inside and out, even to brushes, soap, and an umbrella, for two hundred marks. Fritzing, in dread of conspicuous masses of luggage, yet staggered by the girl's conviction, pulled out a third hundred mark note, but added words in his extremity of so strong and final a nature, that she, quailing, did keep within this limit, and the box was packed. Thus Priscilla's outfit cost almost exactly fifteen pounds. It will readily be imagined that it was neat.

Painfully the two fugitives rode through the cobbled streets of Kunitz. Priscilla was very shaky on a bicycle, and so was Fritzing. Some years before this, when it had been the fashion, she had bicycled every day in the grand ducal park on the other side of the town. Then, tired of it, she had given it up; and now for the last week or two, ever since Fritzing had told her that if they fled it would have to be on bicycles, she had pretended a renewed passion for it, riding every day round and round a circle of which the chilled and astonished Countess Disthal, whose duty it was to stand and watch, had been the disgusted central point. But the cobbles of Kunitz are very different from those smooth places in the park. All who bicycle round Kunitz know them as trying to the most skilful. Naturally, then, the fugitives advanced very slowly, Fritzing's heart in his mouth each time they passed a brightly-lit shop or a person who looked at them. Conceive how nearly this poor heart must have jumped right out of his mouth, leaving him dead, when a policeman who had been watching them strode suddenly into the middle of the street, put up his hand, and said, "Halt."

Fritzing, unstrung man, received a shock so awful that he obeyed by falling off. Priscilla, wholly unused to being told to halt and absorbed by the difficulties of the way, did not grasp that the order was meant for her and rode painfully on. Seeing this, the policeman very gallantly removed her from her bicycle by putting his arms round her and lifting her off. He set her quite gently on her feet, and was altogether a charming policeman, as unlike those grim and ghastly eyes of the law that glare up and down the streets of, say, Berlin, as it is possible to imagine.

But Priscilla was perfectly molten with rage, insulted as she had never been in her life. "How dare you—how dare you," she stammered, suffocating; and forgetting everything but an overwhelming desire to box the giant's ears she had actually raised her hand to do it, which would of course have been the ruin of her plan and the end of my tale, when Fritzing, recovering his presence of mind, cried out in tones of unmistakable agony, "Niece, be calm."

She calmed at once to a calm of frozen horror.

"Now, sir," said Fritzing, assuming an air of brisk bravery and guiltlessness, "what can we do for you?"

"Light your lamps," said the policeman, laconically.

They did; or rather Fritzing did, while Priscilla stood passive.

"I too have a niece," said the policeman, watching Fritzing at work; "but I light no lamps for her. One should not wait on one's niece. One's niece should wait on one."

Fritzing did not answer. He finished lighting the lamps, and then held Priscilla's bicycle and started her.

"I never did that for my niece," said the policeman.

"Confound your niece, sir," was on the tip of Fritzing's tongue; but he gulped it down, and remarking instead as pleasantly as he could that being an uncle did not necessarily prevent your being a gentleman, picked up his bicycle and followed Priscilla.

The policeman shook his head as they disappeared round the corner. "One does not light lamps for one's niece," he repeated to himself. "It's against nature. Consequently, though the peppery Fräulein may well be somebody's niece she is not his."

"Oh," murmured Priscilla, after they had ridden some way without speaking, "I'm deteriorating already. For the first time in my life I've wanted to box people's ears."

"The provocation was great, ma'am," said Fritzing, himself shattered by the spectacle of his Princess being lifted about by a policeman.

"Do you think—" Priscilla hesitated, and looked at him. Her bicycle immediately hesitated too, and swerving across the road taught her it would have nothing looked at except its handles. "Do you think," she went on, after she had got herself straight again, "that the way I'm going to live now will make me want to do it often?"

"Heaven forbid, ma'am. You are now going to live a most noble life—the only fitting life for the thoughtful and the earnest. It will be, once you are settled, far more sheltered from contact with that which stirs ignoble impulses than anything your Grand Ducal Highness has hitherto known."

"If you mean policemen by things that stir ignoble impulses," said Priscilla, "I was sheltered enough from them before. Why, I never spoke to one. Much less"—she shuddered—"much less ever touched one."

"Ma'am, you do not repent?"

"Heavens, no," said Priscilla, pressing onward.

Outside Rühl, about a hundred yards before its houses begin, there is a pond by the wayside. Into this, after waiting a moment peering up and down the dark road to see whether anybody was looking, Fritzing hurled the bicycles. He knew the pond was deep, for he had studied it the day he bought Priscilla's outfit; and the two bicycles one after the other were hurled remorsefully into the middle of it, disappearing each in its turn with a tremendous splash and gurgle. Then they walked on quickly towards the railway station, infinitely relieved to be on their own feet again, and between them, all unsuspected, walked the radiant One with the smiling eyes, she who was half-minded to see this game through, giving the players just so many frights as would keep her amused, the fickle, laughing goddess Good Luck.

They caught the train neatly at Rühl. They only had to wait about the station for ten minutes before it came in. Hardly any one was there, and nobody took the least notice of them. Fritzing, after a careful look round to see if it contained people he knew, put the Princess into a second-class carriage labelled *Frauen*, and then respectfully withdrew to another part of the train. He had decided that second-class was safest. People in that country nearly always travel second-class, especially women,—at all times in such matters more economical than men; and a woman by herself in a first-class carriage would have been an object of surmise and curiosity at every station. Therefore Priscilla was put into the carriage labelled *Frauen*, and found herself for the first time in her life alone with what she had hitherto only heard alluded to vaguely as the public.

She sat down in a corner with an odd feeling of surprise at being included in the category *Frauen*, and giving a swift timid glance through her veil at the public confronting her was relieved to find it consisted only of a comfortable mother and her child.

I know not why the adjective comfortable should so invariably be descriptive of mothers in Germany. In England and France though you may be a mother, you yet, I believe, may be so without being comfortable. In Germany, somehow, you can't. Perhaps it is the climate; perhaps it is the food; perhaps it is simply want of soul, or that your soul does not burn with a fire sufficiently consuming. Anyhow it is so. This mother had all the good-nature that goes with amplitude. Being engaged in feeding her child with *belegte Brödchen*—that immensely satisfying form of sandwich—she at once offered Priscilla one.

"No thank you," said Priscilla, shrinking into her corner.

"Do take one, Fräulein," said the mother, persuasively.

"No thank you," said Priscilla, shrinking.

"On a journey it passes the time. Even if one is not hungry, thank God one can always eat. Do take one."

"No thank you," said Priscilla.

"Why does she wear that black thing over her face?" inquired the child. "Is she a witch?"

"Silence, silence, little worthless one," cried the mother, delightedly stroking his face with half a *Brödchen*. "You see he is clever, Fräulein. He resembles his dear father as one egg does another."

"Does he?" said Priscilla, immediately conceiving a prejudice against the father.

"Why don't she take that black thing off?" said the child.

"Hush, hush, small impudence. The Fräulein will take it off in a minute. The Fräulein has only just got in."

"Mutti, is she a witch? Mutti, Mutti, is she a witch, Mutti?"

The child, his eyes fixed anxiously on Priscilla's swathed head, began to whimper.

"That child should be in bed," said Priscilla, with a severity born of her anxiety lest, to calm him, humanity should force her to put up her veil. "Persons who are as intelligent as that should never be in trains at night. Their brains cannot bear it. Would he not be happier if he lay down and went to sleep?"

"Yes, yes; that is what I have been telling him ever since we left Kunitz"—Priscilla shivered—"but he will not go. Dost thou hear what the Fräulein says, Hans-Joachim?"

"Why don't she take that black thing off?" whimpered the child.

But how could the poor Princess, however anxious to be kind, take off her veil and show her well-known face to this probable inhabitant of Kunitz?

"Do take it off, Fräulein," begged the mother, seeing she made no preparations to do so. "When he gets ideas into his head there is never peace till he has what he wants. He does remind me so much of his father."

"Did you ever," said Priscilla, temporizing, "try him with a little—just a little slap? Only a little one," she added hastily, for the mother looked at her oddly, "only as a sort of counter-irritant. And it needn't be really hard, you know—"

"*Ach*, she's a witch—Mutti, she's a witch!" shrieked the child, flinging his face, butter and all, at these portentous words, into his mother's lap.

"There, there, poor tiny one," soothed the mother, with an indignant side-glance at Priscilla. "Poor tiny man, no one shall slap thee. The Fräulein does not allude to thee, little son. The Fräulein is thinking of bad children such as the sons of Schultz and thy cousin Meyer. Fräulein, if you do not remove your veil I fear he will have convulsions."

"Oh," said the unhappy Priscilla, getting as far into her corner as she could, "I'm so sorry—but I—but I really can't."

"She's a witch, Mutti!" roared the child, "I tell it to thee again—therefore is she so black, and must not show her face!"

"Hush, hush, shut thy little eyes," soothed the mother, putting her hand over them. To Priscilla she said, with an obvious dawning of distrust, "But Fräulein, what reason can you have for hiding yourself?"

"Hiding myself?" echoed Priscilla, now very unhappy indeed, "I'm not hiding myself. I've got—I've got—I'm afraid I've got a—an affection of the skin. That's why I wear a veil."

"*Ach*, poor Fräulein," said the mother, brightening at once into lively interest. "Hans-Joachim, sleep," she added sharply to her son, who tried to raise his head to interrupt with fresh doubts a conversation grown thrilling. "That is indeed a misfortune. It is a rash?"

"Oh, it's dreadful," said Priscilla, faintly.

"*Ach*, poor Fräulein. When one is married, rashes no longer matter. One's husband has to love one in spite of rashes. But for a Fräulein every spot is of importance. There is a young lady of my acquaintance whose life-happiness was shipwrecked only by spots. She came out in them at the wrong moment."

"Did she?" murmured Priscilla.

"You are going to a doctor?"

"Yes—that is, no—I've been."

"Ah, you have been to Kunitz to Dr. Kraus?"

"Y—es. I've been there."

"What does he say?"

"That I must always wear a veil."

"Because it looks so bad?"

"I suppose so."

There was a silence. Priscilla lay back in her corner exhausted, and shut her eyes. The mother stared fixedly at her, one hand mechanically stroking Hans-Joachim, the other holding him down.

"When I was a girl," said the mother, so suddenly that Priscilla started, "I had a good deal of trouble with my skin. Therefore my experience on the subject is great. Show me your face, Fräulein—I might be able to tell you what to do to cure it."

"Oh, on no account—on no account whatever," cried Priscilla, sitting up very straight and speaking with extraordinary emphasis. "I couldn't think of it—I really positively couldn't."

"But my dear Fräulein, why mind a woman seeing it?"

"But what do you want to see it for?"

"I wish to help you."

"I don't want to be helped. I'll show it to nobody—to nobody at all. It's much too—too dreadful."

"Well, well, do not be agitated. Girls, I know, are vain. If any one can help you it will be Dr. Kraus. He is an excellent physician, is he not?"

"Yes," said Priscilla, dropping back into her corner.

"The Grand Duke is a great admirer of his. He is going to ennoble him."

"Really?"

"They say—no doubt it is gossip, but still, you know, he is a very handsome man—that the Countess von Disthal will marry him."

"Gracious!" cried Priscilla, startled, "what, whether he wants to or not?"

"No doubt he will want to. It would be a brilliant match for him."

"But she's at least a hundred. Why, she looks like his mother. And he is a person of no birth at all."

"Birth? He is of course not noble yet, but his family is excellent. And since it is not possible to have as many ailments as she has and still be alive, some at least must be feigned. Why, then, should she feign if it is not in order to see the doctor? They were saying in Kunitz that she sent for him this very day."

"Yes, she did. But she's really ill this time. I'm afraid the poor thing caught cold watching—dear me, only see how sweetly your little boy sleeps. You should make Levallier paint him in that position."

"Ah, he looks truly lovely, does he not. Exactly thus does his dear father look when asleep. Sometimes I cannot sleep myself for joy over the splendid picture. What is the matter with the Countess Disthal? Did Dr. Kraus tell you?"

"No, no. I—I heard something—a rumour."

"Ah, something feigned again, no doubt. Well, it will be a great match for him. You know she is lady-in-waiting to the Princess Priscilla, the one who is so popular and has such red hair? The Countess has an easy life. The other two Princesses have given their ladies a world of trouble, but Priscilla—oh, she is a model. Kunitz is indeed proud of her. They say in all things she is exactly what a Princess should be, and may be trusted never to say or do anything not entirely fitting her station. You have seen her? She often drives through the town, and then the people all run and look as pleased as if it were a holiday. We in Gerstein are quite jealous. Our duchy has no such princess to show. Do you think she is so beautiful? I have often seen her, and I do not think she is. People exaggerate everything so about a princess. My husband does not admire her at all. He says it is not what he calls classic. Her hair, for instance—but that one might get over. And people who are really beautiful always have dark eyelashes. Then her nose—my husband often laughs, and says her nose—"

"Oh," said Priscilla, faintly, "I've got a dreadful headache. I think I'll try to sleep a little if you would not mind not talking."

"Yes, that hot thing round your face must be very trying. Now if you were not so vain—what does a rash matter when only women are present? Well, well, I will not tease you. Do you know many of the Kunitzers? Do you know the Levisohns well?"

"Oh," sighed Priscilla, laying her distracted head against the cushions and shutting her eyes, "who are they?"

"Who are they? Who are the Levisohns? But dearest Fräulein if you know Kunitz you must know the Levisohns. Why, the Levisohns *are* Kunitz. They are more important far than the Grand Duke. They lend to it, and they lead it. You must know their magnificent shop at the corner of the Heiligengeiststrasse? Perhaps," she added, with a glance at the Princess's shabby serge gown, "you have not met them socially, but you must know the magnificent shop. We visit."

"Do you?" said Priscilla wearily, as the mother paused.

"And you know her story, of course?"

"Oh, oh," sighed Priscilla, turning her head from side to side on the cushions, vainly seeking peace.

"It is hardly a story for the ears of Fräuleins."

"Please don't tell it, then."

"No, I will not. It is not for Fräuleins. But one still sees she must have been a handsome woman. And he, Levisohn, was clever enough to see his way to Court favour. The Grand Duke—"

"I don't think I care to hear about the Levisohns," said Priscilla, sitting up suddenly and speaking with great distinctness. "Gossip is a thing I detest. None shall be talked in my presence."

"Hoity-toity," said the astonished mother; and it will easily be believed that no one had ever said hoity-toity to Priscilla before.

She turned scarlet under her veil. For a moment she sat with flashing eyes, and the hand lying in her lap twitched convulsively. Is it possible she was thinking of giving the comfortable mother that admonition which the policeman had so narrowly escaped? I know not what would have happened if the merry goddess, seeing things rushing to this dreadful climax, had not stopped the train in the nick of time at a wayside station and caused a breathless lady, pushing parcels before her, to clamber in. The mother's surprised stare was of necessity diverted to the new-comer. A parcel thrust into Priscilla's hands brought her back of necessity to her senses.

"*Danke, Danke,*" cried the breathless lady, though no help had been offered; and hoisting herself in she wished both her fellow-passengers a boisterous good evening. The lady, evidently an able person, arranged her parcels swiftly and neatly in the racks, pulled up the windows, slammed the ventilators, stripped off her cloak, flung back her veil, and sitting down with a sigh of vast depth and length stared steadily for five minutes without wavering at the other two. At the end of that time she and the mother began, as with a common impulse, to talk. And at the end of five minutes more they had told each other where they were going, where they had been, what their husbands were, the number, age, and girth of their children, and all the adjectives that might most conveniently be used to describe their servants. The adjectives, very lurid ones, took some time. Priscilla shut her eyes while they were going on, thankful to be left quiet, feeling unstrung to the last degree; and she gradually dropped into an uneasy doze whose chief feature was the distressful repetition, like hammer-strokes on her brain, of the words, "You're deteriorating—deteriorating—deteriorating."

"*Lieber Gott,*" she whispered at last, folding her hands in her lap, "don't let me deteriorate too much. Please keep me from wanting to box people's ears. *Lieber Gott,* it's so barbarous of me. I never used to want to. Please stop me wanting to now."

And after that she dropped off quite, into a placid little slumber.

III

They crossed from Calais in the turbine. Their quickest route would have been Cologne-Ostend-Dover, and every moment being infinitely valuable Fritzing wanted to go that way, but Priscilla was determined to try whether turbines are really as steady as she had heard they were. The turbine was so steady that no one could have told it was doing anything but being quiescent on solid earth; but that was because, as Fritzing explained, there was a dead calm, and in dead calms—briefly, he explained the conduct of boats in dead calms with much patience, and Priscilla remarked when he had done that they might then, after all, have crossed by Ostend.

"We might, ma'am, and we would be in London now if we had," said Fritzing.

They had, indeed, lost several hours and some money coming by Calais, and Fritzing had lost his temper as well.

Fritzing, you remember, was sixty, and had not closed his eyes all night. He had not, so far as that goes, closed his eyes for nights without number; and what his soul had gone through during those nights was more than any soul no longer in its first youth should be called upon to bear. In the train between Cologne and Calais he had even, writhing in his seat, cursed every single one of his long-cherished ideals, called them fools, shaken his fist at them; a dreadful state of mind to get to. He did not reveal anything of this to his dear Princess, and talking to her on the turbine wore the clear brow of the philosopher; but he did feel that he was a much-tried man, and he behaved to the maid Annalise exactly in the way much-tried men do behave when they have found some one they think defenceless. Unfortunately Annalise was only apparently defenceless. Fritzing would have known it if he had been more used to running away. He did, in his calmer moments, dimly opine it. The plain fact was that Annalise held both him and Priscilla in the hollow of her hand.

At this point she had not realized it. She still was awestruck by her promotion, and looked so small and black and uncertain among her new surroundings on the turbine that if not clever of him it was at least natural that he should address her in a manner familiar to those who have had to do with men when they are being tried. He behaved, that is, to Annalise, as he had behaved to his ideals in the night; he shook his fist at her, and called her fool. It was because she had broken the Princess's umbrella. This was the new umbrella bought by him with so much trouble in Gerstein two days before, and therefore presumably of a sufficient toughness to stand any reasonable treatment for a time. There was a mist and a drizzle at Calais, and Priscilla, refusing to go under shelter, had sent Fritzing to fetch her umbrella, and when he demanded it of Annalise, she offered it him in two pieces. This alone was enough to upset a wise man, because wise men are easily upset; but Annalise declared besides that the umbrella had broken itself. It probably had. What may not one expect of anything so cheap? Fritzing, however, was maddened by this explanation, and wasted quite a long time pointing out to her in passionate language that it was an inanimate object, and that inanimate objects have no initiative and never therefore break themselves. To which Annalise, with a stoutness ominous as a revelation of character, replied by repeating her declaration that the umbrella had certainly broken itself. Then it was that he shook his fist at her and called her fool. So greatly was he moved that, after walking away and thinking it over, he went to her a second time and shook his fist at her and called her knave.

I will not linger over this of the umbrella; it teems with lessons.

While it was going on the Princess was being very happy. She was sitting unnoticed in a deck-chair and feeling she was really off at last into the Ideal. Some of us know the fascination of that feeling, and all of us know the fascination of new things; and to be unnoticed was for her of a most thrilling newness. Nobody looked at her. People walked up and down the deck in front of her as though she were not there. One hurried passenger actually tripped over her feet, and passed on with the briefest apology. Everywhere she saw indifferent faces, indifferent, oblivious faces. It was simply glorious. And she had had no trials since leaving Gerstein. There Fritzing had removed her beyond the

range of the mother's eyes, grown at last extremely cold and piercing; Annalise, all meek anxiety to please, had put her to bed in the sleeping-car of the Brussels express; and in the morning her joy had been childish at having a little tray with bad coffee on it thrust in by a busy attendant, who slammed it down on the table and hurried out without so much as glancing at her. How delicious that was. The Princess laughed with delight and drank the coffee, grits and all. Oh, the blessed freedom of being insignificant. It was as good, she thought, as getting rid of your body altogether and going about an invisible spirit. She sat on the deck of the apparently motionless turbine and thought gleefully of past journeys, now for ever done with; of the grand ducal train, of herself drooping inside it as wearily as the inevitable bouquets drooping on the tables, of the crowds of starers on every platform, of the bowing officials wherever your eye chanced to turn. The Countess Disthal, of course, had been always at her elbow, and when she had to go to the window and do the gracious her anxiety lest she should bestow one smile too few had only been surpassed by the Countess's anxiety lest she should bestow one smile too many. Well, that was done with now; as much done with as a nightmare, grisly staleness, is done with when you wake to a fair spring morning and the smell of dew. And she had no fears. She was sure, knowing him as she did, that when the Grand Duke found out she had run away he would make no attempt to fetch her back, but would simply draw a line through his remembrance of her, rub her out of his mind, (his heart, she knew, would need no rubbing, because she had never been in it,) and after the first fury was over, fury solely on account of the scandal, he would be as he had been before, while she—oh wonderful new life!—she would be born again to all the charities.

Now how can I, weak vessel whose only ballast is a cargo of interrogations past which life swirls with a thunder of derisively contradictory replies, pretend to say whether Priscilla ought to have had conscience-qualms or not? Am I not deafened by the roar of answers, all seemingly so right yet all so different, that the simplest question brings? And would not the answering roar to anything so complicated as a question about conscience-qualms deafen me for ever? I shall leave the Princess, then, to run away from her home and her parent if she chooses, and make no effort to whitewash any part of her conduct that may seem black. I shall chronicle, and not comment. I shall try to, that is, for comments are very dear to me. Indeed I see I cannot move on even now till I have pointed out that though Priscilla was getting as far as she could from the Grand Duke she was also getting as near as she could to the possession of her soul; and there are many persons who believe this to be a thing so precious that it is absolutely the one thing worth living for.

The crossing to Dover, then, was accomplished quite peacefully by Priscilla. Not so, however, by Fritzing. He, tormented man, chief target for the goddess's darts, spent his time holding on to the rail along the turbine's side in order to steady himself; and as there was a dead calm that day the reader will at once perceive that the tempest must have been inside Fritzing himself. It was; and it had been raised to hurricane pitch by some snatches of the talk of two Englishmen he had heard as they paced up and down past where he was standing.

The first time they passed, one was saying to the other, "I never heard of anything so infamous."

This ought not to have made Fritzing, a person of stainless life and noble principles, start, but it did. He started; and he listened anxiously for more.

"Yes," said the other, who had a newspaper under his arm, "they deserve about as bad as they'll ___"

He was out of ear-shot; but Fritzing mechanically finished the sentence himself. Who had been infamous? And what were they going to get? It was at this point that he laid hold of the handrail to steady himself till the two men should pass again.

"You can tell, of course, what steps our Government will take," was the next snatch.

"I shall be curious to see the attitude of the foreign papers," was the next.

"Anything more wanton I never heard of," was the next.

"Of all the harmless, innocent creatures—" was the next.

And the last snatch of all—for though they went on walking Fritzing heard no more after it—was the brief and singular expression "Devils."

Devils? *What* were they talking about? Devils? Was that, then, how the public stigmatized blameless persons in search of peace? Devils? What, himself and—no, never Priscilla. She was clearly the harmless innocent creature, and he must be the other thing. But why plural? He could only suppose that he and Annalise together formed a sulphurous plural. He clung very hard to the rail. Who could have dreamed it would get so quickly into the papers? Who could have dreamed the news of it would call forth such blazing words? They would be confronted at Dover by horrified authorities. His Princess was going to be put in a most impossible position. What had he done? Heavens and earth, what had he done?

He clung to the rail, staring miserably over the side into the oily water. Some of the passengers lingered to watch him, at first because they thought he was going to be seasick with so little provocation that it amounted to genius, and afterwards because they were sure he must want to commit suicide. When they found that time passed and he did neither, he became unpopular, and they went away and left him altogether and contemptuously alone.

"Fritzi, are you worried about anything?" asked Priscilla, coming to where he still stood staring, although they had got to Dover.

Worried! When all Europe was going to be about their ears? When he was in the eyes of the world a criminal—an aider, abettor, lurer-away of youth and impulsiveness? He loved the Princess so much that he cared nothing for his own risks, but what about hers? In an agony of haste he rushed to his ideals and principles for justification and comfort, tumbling them over, searching feverishly among them. They had forsaken him. They were so much lifeless rubbish. Nowhere in his mind could he find a rag of either comfort or justification with which to stop up his ears against the words of the two Englishmen and his eyes against the dreadful sight he felt sure awaited them on the quay at Dover—the sight of incensed authorities ready to pounce on him and drag him away for ever from his Princess.

Priscilla gazed at him in astonishment. He was taking no notice of her, and was looking fearfully up and down the row of faces that were watching the turbine's arrival.

"Fritzi, if you are worried it must be because you've not slept," said Priscilla, laying her hand with a stroking little movement on his sleeve; for what but overwrought nerves could make him look so odd? It was after all Fritzing who had behaved with the braveness of a lion the night before in that matter of the policeman; and it was he who had asked in stern tones of rebuke, when her courage seemed aflicker, whether she repented. "You do not repent?" she asked, imitating that sternness.

"Ma'am—" he began in a low and dreadful voice, his eyes ceaselessly ranging up and down the figures on the quay.

"Sh—sh—Niece," interrupted Priscilla, smiling.

He turned and looked at her as a man may look for the last time at the thing in life that has been most dear to him, and said nothing.

IV

But nobody was waiting for them at Dover. Fritzing's agonies might all have been spared. They passed quite unnoticed through the crowd of idlers to the train, and putting Priscilla and her maid into it he rushed at the nearest newspaper-boy, pouncing on him, tearing a handful of his papers from him, and was devouring their contents before the astonished boy had well finished his request that he should hold hard. The boy, who had been brought up in the simple faith that one should pay one's pennies first and read next, said a few things under his breath about Germans—crude short things not worth repeating—and jerking his thumb towards the intent Fritzing, winked at a detective who was standing near. The detective did not need the wink. His bland, abstracted eyes were already on Fritzing, and he was making rapid mental notes of the goggles, the muffler, the cap pulled down over the ears. Truly it is a great art, that of running away, and needs incessant practice.

And after all there was not a word about the Princess in the papers. They were full, as the Englishmen on the turbine had been full, of something the Russians, who at that time were always doing something, had just done—something that had struck England from end to end into a blaze of indignation and that has nothing to do with my story. Fritzing dropped the papers on the platform, and had so little public spirit that he groaned aloud with relief.

"Shilling and a penny 'alfpenny, please, sir," said the newspaper-boy glibly. "*Westminster Gazette*, sir, *Daily Mail*, *Sporting and Dramatic*, one *Lady*, and two *Standards*." From which it will be seen that Fritzing had seized his handful very much at random.

He paid the boy without heeding his earnest suggestions that he should try *Tit-Bits*, the *Saturday Review*, and *Mother*, to complete, said the boy, in substance if not in words, his bird's-eye view over the field of representative English journalism, and went back to the Princess with a lighter heart than he had had for months. The detective, apparently one of Nature's gentlemen, picked up the scattered papers, and following Fritzing offered them him in the politest way imaginable just as Priscilla was saying she wanted to see what tea-baskets were like.

"Sir," said the detective, taking off his hat, "I believe these are yours."

"Sir," said Fritzing, taking off his cap in his turn and bowing with all the ceremony of foreigners, "I am much obliged to you."

"Pray don't mention it, sir," said the detective, on whose brain the three were in that instant photographed—the veiled Priscilla, the maid sitting on the edge of the seat as though hardly daring to sit at all, and Fritzing's fine head and mop of grey hair.

Priscilla, as she caught his departing eye, bowed and smiled graciously. He withdrew to a little distance, and fell into a reverie: where had he seen just that mechanically gracious bow and smile? They were very familiar to him.

As the train slowly left the station he saw the lady in the veil once more. She was alone with her maid, and was looking out of the window at nothing in particular, and the station-master, who was watching the train go, chanced to meet her glance. Again there was the same smile and bow, quite mechanical, quite absent-minded, distinctly gracious. The station-master stared in astonishment after the receding carriage. The detective roused himself from his reverie sufficiently to step forward and neatly swing himself into the guard's van: there being nothing to do in Dover he thought he would go to London.

I believe I have forgotten, in the heat of narration, to say that the fugitives were bound for Somersetshire. Fritzing had been a great walker in the days when he lived in England, and among other places had walked about Somersetshire. It is a pleasant county; fruitful, leafy, and mild. Down in the valleys myrtles and rhododendrons have been known to flower all through the winter. Devonshire junkets and Devonshire cider are made there with the same skill precisely as in Devonshire; and the parts of it that lie round Exmoor are esteemed by those who hunt.

Fritzing quite well remembered certain villages buried among the hills, miles from the nearest railway, and he also remembered the farmhouses round about these villages where he had lodged. To one of these he had caused a friend in London to write engaging rooms for himself and his niece, and there he proposed to stay till they should have found the cottage the Princess had set her heart on.

This cottage, as far as he could gather from the descriptions she gave him from time to time, was going to be rather difficult to find. He feared also that it would be a very insect-ridden place, and that their calm pursuits would often be interrupted by things like earwigs. It was to be ancient, and much thatched and latticed and rose-overgrown. It was, too, to be very small; the smallest of labourers' cottages. Yet though so small and so ancient it was to have several bathrooms—one for each of them, so he understood; "For," said the Princess, "if Annalise hasn't a bathroom how can she have a bath? And if she hasn't had a bath how can I let her touch me?"

"Perhaps," said Fritzing, bold in his ignorance of Annalise's real nature, "she could wash at the pump. People do, I believe, in the country. I remember there were always pumps."

"But do pumps make you clean enough?" inquired the Princess, doubtfully.

"We can try her with one. I fancy, ma'am, it will be less difficult to find a cottage that has only two bathrooms than one that has three. And I know there are invariably pumps."

Searching his memory he could recollect no bathrooms at all, but he did not say so, and silently hoped the best.

To the Somerset village of Symford and to the farm about a mile outside it known as Baker's, no longer, however, belonging to Baker, but rented by a Mr. Pearce, they journeyed down from Dover without a break. Nothing alarming happened on the way. They were at Victoria by five, and the Princess sat joyfully making the acquaintance of a four-wheeler's inside for twenty minutes during which Fritzing and Annalise got the luggage through the customs. Fritzing's goggles and other accessories of flight inspired so much interest in the customs that they could hardly bear to let him go and it seemed as if they would never tire of feeling about in the harmless depths of Priscilla's neat box. They had however ultimately to part from him, for never was luggage more innocent; and rattling past Buckingham Palace on the way to Paddington Priscilla blew it a cheerful kiss, symbolic of a happiness too great to bear ill-will. Later on Windsor Castle would have got one too, if it had not been so dark that she could not see it. The detective, who felt himself oddly drawn towards the trio, went down into Somersetshire by the same train as they did, but parted from them at Ullerton, the station you get out at when you go to Symford. He did not consider it necessary to go further; and taking a bedroom at Ullerton in the same little hotel from which Fritzing had ordered the conveyance that was to drive them their last seven miles he went to bed, it being close on midnight, with Mr. Pearce's address neatly written in his notebook.

This, at present, is the last of the detective. I will leave him sleeping with a smile on his face, and follow the dog-cart as it drove along that beautiful road between wooded hills that joins Ullerton to Symford, on its way to Baker's Farm.

At the risk of exhausting Priscilla Fritzing had urged pushing on without a stop, and Priscilla made no objection. This is how it came about that the ostler attached to the Ullerton Arms found himself driving to Symford in the middle of the night. He could not recollect ever having done such a thing before, and the memory of it would be quite unlikely to do anything but remain fixed in his mind till his dying day. Fritzing was a curiously conspicuous fugitive.

It was a clear and beautiful night, and the stars twinkled brightly over the black tree-tops. Down in the narrow gorge through which the road runs they could not feel the keen wind that was blowing up on Exmoor. The waters of the Sym, whose windings they followed, gurgled over their stones almost as quietly as in summer. There was a fresh wet smell, consoling and delicious after the train, the smell of country puddles and country mud and dank dead leaves that had been rained upon all day. Fritzing sat with the Princess on the back seat of the dog-cart, and busied himself keeping the rug well round her, the while his soul was full of thankfulness that their journey should after all have been so easy.

He was weary in body, but very jubilant in mind. The Princess was so weary in body that she had no mind at all, and dozed and nodded and threatened to fall out, and would have fallen out a dozen times but for Fritzing's watchfulness. As for Annalise, who can guess what thoughts were hers while she was being jogged along to Baker's? That they were dark I have not a doubt. No one had told her this was to be a journey into the Ideal; no one had told her anything but that she was promoted to travelling with the Princess and that she would be well paid so long as she held her tongue. She had never travelled before, yet there were some circumstances of the journey that could not fail to strike the most inexperienced. This midnight jogging in the dog-cart, for instance. It was the second night spent out of bed, and all day long she had expected every moment would end the journey, and the end, she had naturally supposed, would be a palace. There would be a palace, and warmth, and light, and food, and welcome, and honour, and appreciative lacqueys with beautiful white silk calves—alas, Annalise's ideal, her one ideal, was to be for ever where there were beautiful white silk calves. The road between Ullerton and Symford conveyed to her mind no assurance whatever of the near neighbourhood of such things; and as for the dog-cart—"*Himmel*," said Annalise to herself, whenever she thought of the dog-cart.

Their journey ended at two in the morning. Almost exactly at that hour they stopped at the garden gate of Baker's Farm, and a woman came out with a lantern and helped them down and lighted them up the path to the porch. The Princess, who could hardly make her eyes open themselves, leaned on Fritzing's arm in a sort of confused dream, got somehow up a little staircase that seemed extraordinarily steep and curly, and was sound asleep in a knobbly bed before Annalise realized she had done with her. Priscilla had forgotten all about the Ideal, all about her eager aspirations. Sleep, dear Mother with the cool hand, had smoothed them all away, the whole rubbish of those daylight toys, and for the next twelve hours sat tenderly by her pillow, her finger on her lips.

V

No better place than Symford can be imagined for those in search of a spot, picturesque and with creepers, where they may spend quiet years guiding their feet along the way of peace. It is one of the prettiest of English villages. It does and has and is everything the ideal village ought to. It nestles, for instance, in the folds of hills; it is very small, and far away from other places; its cottages are old and thatched; its little inn is the inn of a story-book, with a quaint signboard and an apparently genial landlord; its church stands beautifully on rising ground among ancient trees, besides being hoary; its vicarage is so charming that to see it makes you long to marry a vicar; its vicar is venerable, with an eye so mild that to catch it is to receive a blessing; pleasant little children with happy morning faces pick butter-cups and go a-nutting at the proper seasons and curtsy to you as you pass; old women with clean caps and suitable faces read their Bibles behind latticed windows; hearths are scrubbed and snowy; appropriate kettles simmer on hobs; climbing roses and trim gardens are abundant; and it has a lady bountiful of so untiring a kindness that each of its female inhabitants gets a new flannel petticoat every Christmas and nothing is asked of her in return but that she shall, during the ensuing year, be warm and happy and good. The same thing was asked, I believe, of the male inhabitants, who get comforters, and also that they should drink seltzer-water whenever their lower natures urged them to drink rum; but comforters are so much smaller than petticoats that the men of Symford's sense of justice rebelled, and since the only time they ever felt really warm and happy and good was when they were drinking rum they decided that on the whole it would be more in accordance with their benefactress's wishes to go on doing it.

Lady Shuttleworth, the lady from whom these comforters and petticoats proceeded, was a just woman who required no more of others than she required of herself, and who was busy and kind, and, I am sure happy and good, on cold water. But then she did not like rum; and I suppose there are few things quite so easy as not to drink rum if you don't like it. She lived at Symford Hall, two miles away in another fold of the hills, and managed the estate of her son who was a minor—at this time on the very verge of ceasing to be one—with great precision and skill. All the old cottages in Symford were his, and so were the farms dotted about the hills. Any one, therefore, seeking a cottage would have to address himself to the Shuttleworth agent, Mr. Dawson, who too lived in a house so picturesque that merely to see it made you long either to poison or to marry Mr. Dawson—preferably, I think, to poison him.

These facts, stripped of the redundances with which I have garnished them, were told Fritzing on the day after his arrival at Baker's Farm by Mrs. Pearce the younger, old Mr. Pearce's daughter-in-law, a dreary woman with a rent in her apron, who brought in the bacon for Fritzing's solitary breakfast and the chop for his solitary luncheon. She also brought in a junket so liquid that the innocent Fritzing told her politely that he always drank his milk out of a glass when he did drink milk, but that, as he never did drink milk, she need not trouble to bring him any.

"Sir," said Mrs. Pearce in her slow sad voice, after a glance at his face in search of sarcasm, "'t isn't milk. 'Tis a junket that hasn't junked."

"Indeed?" said Fritzing, bland because ignorant.

Mrs. Pearce fidgeted a little, wrestling perhaps with her conscience, before she added defiantly, "It wouldn't."

"Indeed?" said Fritzing once more; and he looked at the junket through his spectacles with that air of extreme and intelligent interest with which persons who wish to please look at other people's babies.

He was desirous of being on good terms with Symford, and had been very pleasant all the morning to Mrs. Pearce. That mood in which, shaken himself to his foundations by anxiety, he had shaken his fist to Annalise, was gone as completely as yesterday's wet mist. The golden sunshine

of October lay beautifully among the gentle hills and seemed to lie as well in Fritzing's heart. He had gone through so much for so many weeks that merely to be free from worries for the moment filled him with thankfulness. So may he feel who has lived through days of bodily torture in that first hour when his pain has gone: beaten, crushed, and cowed by suffering, he melts with gratitude because he is being left alone, he gasps with a relief so utter that it is almost abject praise of the Cruelty that has for a little loosened its hold. In this abjectly thankful mood was Fritzing when he found his worst agonies were done. What was to come after he really for the moment did not care. It was sufficient to exist untormented and to let his soul stretch itself in the privacy and peace of Baker's. He and his Princess had made a great and noble effort towards the realization of dreams that he felt were lofty, and the gods so far had been with them. All that first morning in Symford he had an oddly restful, unburdened feeling, as of having been born again and born aged twenty-five; and those persons who used to be twenty-five themselves will perhaps agree that this must have been rather nice. He did not stir from the parlour lest the Princess should come down and want him, and he spent the waiting hours getting information from Mrs. Pearce and informing her mind in his turn with just that amount of knowledge about himself and his niece that he wished Symford to possess. With impressive earnestness he told her his name was Neumann, repeating it three times, almost as if in defiance of contradiction; that his niece was his deceased brother's child; that her Christian name—here he was swept away by inspiration—was Maria-Theresa; that he had saved enough as a teacher of German in London to retire into the country; and that he was looking for a cottage in which to spend his few remaining years.

It all sounded very innocent. Mrs. Pearce listened with her head on one side and with something of the air of a sparrow who doesn't feel well. She complimented him sadly on the fluency of his English, and told him with a sigh that in no cottage would he ever again find the comforts with which Baker's was now surrounding him.

Fritzing was surprised to hear her say so, for his impressions had all been the other way. As far as he, inexperienced man, could tell, Baker's was a singularly draughty and unscrubbed place. He smelt that its fires smoked, he heard that its windows rattled, he knew that its mattresses had lumps in them, and he saw that its food was inextricably mixed up with objects of a black and gritty nature. But her calm face and sorrowful assurance shook the evidence of his senses, and gazing at her in silence over his spectacles a feeling crept dimly across his brain that if the future held many dealings with women like Mrs. Pearce he was going to be very helpless.

Priscilla appeared while he was gazing. She was dressed for going out and came in buttoning her gloves, and I suppose it was a long time since Baker's had seen anything quite so radiant in the way of nieces within its dusty walls. She had on the clothes she had travelled in, for a search among the garments bought by Fritzing had resulted in nothing but a sitting on the side of the bed and laughing tears, so it was clearly not the clothes that made her seem all of a sparkle with lovely youth and blitheness. Kunitz would not have recognized its ivory Princess in this bright being. She was the statue come to life, the cool perfection kissed by expectation into a bewitching living woman. I doubt whether Fritzing had ever noticed her beauty while at Kunitz. He had seen her every day from childhood on, and it is probable that his attention being always riveted on her soul he had never really known when her body left off being lanky and freckled. He saw it now, however; he would have been blind if he had not; and it set him vibrating with the throb of a new responsibility. Mrs. Pearce saw it too, and stared astonished at this oddly inappropriate niece. She stared still more when Fritzing, jumping up from his chair, bent over the hand Priscilla held out and kissed it with a devotion and respect wholly absent from the manner of Mrs. Pearce's own uncles. She, therefore, withdrew into her kitchen, and being a person of little culture crudely expressed her wonder by thinking "Lor." To which, after an interval of vague meanderings among saucepans, she added the elucidation, "Foreigners."

Half an hour later Lady Shuttleworth's agent, Mr. Dawson, was disturbed at his tea by the announcement that a gentleman wished to speak to him. Mr. Dawson was a bluff person, and something of a tyrant, for he reigned supreme in Symford after Lady Shuttleworth, and to reign supreme over anybody, even over a handful of cottagers, does bring out what a man may have in him of tyrant. Another circumstance that brings this out is the possession of a meek wife; and Mr. Dawson's wife was really so very meek that I fear when the Day of Reckoning comes much of this tyranny will be forgiven him and laid to her account. Mr. Dawson, in fact, represented an unending series of pitfalls set along his wife's path by Fate, into every one of which she fell; and since we are not supposed, on pain of punishment, to do anything but keep very upright on our feet as we trudge along the dusty road of life, no doubt all those amiable stumblings will be imputed to her in the end for sin. "This man was handed over to you quite nice and kind," one can imagine Justice saying in an awful voice; "his intentions to start with were beyond reproach. Do you not remember, on the eve of your wedding, how he swore with tears he would be good to you? Look, now, what you have made of him. You have prevented his being good to you by your own excessive goodness to him. You have spent your time nourishing his bad qualities. Though he still swears, he never does it with tears. Do you not know the enormous, the almost insurmountable difficulty there is in not bullying meekness, in not responding to the cringer with a kick? Weak and unteachable woman, away with you."

Certainly it is a great responsibility taking a man into one's life. It is also an astonishment to me that I write thus in detail of Mrs. Dawson, for she has nothing whatever to do with the story.

"Who is it?" asked Mr. Dawson; immediately adding, "Say I'm engaged."

"He gave no name, sir. He says he wishes to see you on business."

"Business! I don't do business at tea time. Send him away."

But Fritzing, for he it was, would not be sent away. Priscilla had seen the cottage of her dreams, seen it almost at once on entering the village, fallen instantly and very violently in love with it regardless of what its inside might be, and had sent him to buy it. She was waiting while he bought it in the adjoining churchyard sitting on a tombstone, and he could neither let her sit there indefinitely nor dare, so great was her eagerness to have the thing, go back without at least a hope of it. Therefore he would not be sent away. "Your master's in," he retorted, when the maid suggested he should depart, "and I must see him. Tell him my business is pressing."

"Will you give me your card, sir?" said the maid, wavering before this determination.

Fritzing, of course, had no card, so he wrote his new name in pencil on a leaf of his notebook, adding his temporary address.

"Tell Mr. Dawson," he said, tearing it out and giving it to her, "that if he is so much engaged as to be unable to see me I shall go direct to Lady Shuttleworth. My business will not wait."

"Show him in, then," growled Mr. Dawson on receiving this message; for he feared Lady Shuttleworth every bit as much as Mrs. Dawson feared him.

Fritzing was accordingly shown into the room used as an office, and was allowed to cool himself there while Mr. Dawson finished his tea. The thought of his Princess waiting on a tombstone that must be growing colder every moment, for the sun was setting, made him at last so impatient that he rang the bell.

"Tell your master," he said when the maid appeared, "that I am now going to Lady Shuttleworth." And he seized his hat and was making indignantly for the door when Mr. Dawson appeared.

Mr. Dawson was wiping his mouth. "You seem to be in a great hurry," he said; and glancing at the slip of paper in his hand added, "Mr. Newman."

"Sir," said Fritzing, bowing with a freezing dignity, "I am."

"Well, so am I. Sit down. What can I do for you? Time's money, you know, and I'm a busy man. You're German, ain't you?"

"I am, sir. My name is Neumann. I am here—"

"Oh, Noyman, is it? I thought it was Newman." And he glanced again at the paper.

"Sir," said Fritzing, with a wave of his hand, "I am here to buy a cottage, and the sooner we come to terms the better. I will not waste valuable moments considering niceties of pronunciation."

Mr. Dawson stared. Then he said, "Buy a cottage?"

"Buy a cottage, sir. I understand that practically the whole of Symford is the property of the Shuttleworth family, and that you are that family's accredited agent. I therefore address myself in the first instance to you. Now, sir, if you are unable, either through disinclination or disability, to do business with me, kindly state the fact at once, and I will straightway proceed to Lady Shuttleworth herself. I have no time to lose."

"I'm blessed if I have either, Mr."—he glanced again at the paper—"Newman."

"Neumann, sir," corrected Fritzing irritably.

"All right—Noyman. But why don't you write it then? You've written Newman as plain as a doorpost."

"Sir, I am not here to exercise you in the proper pronunciation of foreign tongues. These matters, of an immense elementariness I must add, should be and generally are acquired by all persons of any education in their childhood at school."

Mr. Dawson stared. "You're a long-winded chap," he said, "but I'm blessed if I know what you're driving at. Suppose you tell me what you've come for, Mr."—he referred as if from habit to the paper—"Newman."

"*Neumann*, sir," said Fritzing very loud, for he was greatly irritated by Mr. Dawson's manner and appearance.

"*Noymann*, then," said Mr. Dawson, equally loudly; indeed it was almost a shout. And he became possessed at the same instant of what was known to Fritzing as a red head, which is the graphic German way of describing the glow that accompanies wrath. "Look here," he said, "if you don't say what you've got to say and have done with it you'd better go. I'm not the chap for the fine-worded game, and I'm hanged if I'll be preached to in my own house. I'll be hanged if I will, do you hear?" And he brought his fist down on the table in a fashion very familiar to Mrs. Dawson and the Symford cottagers.

"Sir, your manners—" said Fritzing, rising and taking up his hat.

"Never mind my manners, Mr. Newman."

"*Neumann*, sir!" roared Fritzing.

"Confound you, sir," was Mr. Dawson's irrelevant reply.

"Sir, confound *you*," said Fritzing, clapping on his hat. "And let me tell you that I am going at once to Lady Shuttleworth and shall recommend to her most serious consideration the extreme desirability of removing you, sir."

"Removing me! Where the deuce to?"

"Sir, I care not whither so long as it is hence," cried Fritzing, passionately striding to the door.

Mr. Dawson lay back in his chair and gasped. The man was plainly mad; but still Lady Shuttleworth might—you never know with women—"Look here—hie, you! Mr. Newman!" he called, for Fritzing had torn open the door and was through it.

"*Neumann*, sir," Fritzing hurled back at him over his shoulder.

"Lady Shuttleworth won't see you, Mr. Noyman. She won't on principle."

Fritzing wavered.

"Everything goes through my hands. You'll only have your walk for nothing. Come back and tell me what it is you want."

"Sir, I will only negotiate with you," said Fritzing down the passage—and Mrs. Dawson hearing him from the drawing-room folded her hands in fear and wonder—"if you will undertake at least to imitate the manners of a gentleman."

"Come, come, you musn't misunderstand me," said Mr. Dawson getting up and going to the door. "I'm a plain man, you know—"

"Then, sir, all I can say is that I object to plain men."

"I say, who are you? One would think you were a duke or somebody, you're so peppery. Dressed up"—Mr. Dawson glanced at the suit of pedagogic black into which Fritzing had once more relapsed—"dressed up as a street preacher."

"I am not dressed up as anything, sir," said Fritzing coming in rather hurriedly. "I am a retired teacher of the German tongue, and have come down from London in search of a cottage in which to spend my remaining years. That cottage I have now found here in your village, and I have come to inquire its price. I wish to buy it as quickly as possible."

"That's all very well, Mr.—oh all right, all right, I won't say it. But why on earth don't you write it properly, then? It's this paper's set me wrong. I was going to say we've got no cottages here for sale. And look here, if that's all you are, a retired teacher, I'll trouble you not to get schoolmastering me again."

"I really think, sir," said Fritzing stretching his hand towards his hat, "that it is better I should try to obtain an interview with Lady Shuttleworth, for I fear you are constitutionally incapable of carrying on a business conversation with the requisite decent self-command."

"Pooh—you'll get nothing out of her. She'll send you back to me. Why, you'd drive her mad in five minutes with that tongue of yours. If you want anything I'm your man. Only let's get at what you do want, without all these confounded dictionary words. Which cottage is it?"

"It is the small cottage," said Fritzing mastering his anger, "adjoining the churchyard. It stands by itself, and is separated from the road by an extremely miniature garden. It is entirely covered by creeping plants which I believe to be roses."

"That's a couple."

"So much the better."

"And they're let. One to the shoemaker, and the other to old mother Shaw."

"Accommodation could no doubt be found for the present tenants in some other house, and I am prepared to indemnify them handsomely. Might I inquire the number of rooms the cottages contain?"

"Two apiece, and a kitchen and attic. Coal-hole and pig-stye in the back yard. Also a pump. But they're not for sale, so what's the use—"

"Sir, do they also contain bathrooms?"

"Bathrooms?" Mr. Dawson stared with so excessively stupid a stare that Fritzing, who heaven could stand stupidity, got angry again.

"I said bathrooms, sir," he said, raising his voice, "and I believe with perfect distinctness."

"Oh, I heard you right enough. I was only wondering if you were trying to be funny."

"Is this a business conversation or is it not?" cried Fritzing, in his turn bringing his fist down on the table.

"Look here, what do you suppose people who live in such places want?"

"I imagine cleanliness and decency as much as anybody else."

"Well, I've never been asked for one with a bathroom in my life."

"You are being asked now," said Fritzing, glaring at him, "but you wilfully refuse to reply. From your manner, however, I conclude that they contain none. If so, no doubt I could quickly have some built."

"Some? Why, how many do you want?"

"I have a niece, sir, and she must have her own."

Mr. Dawson again stared with what seemed to Fritzing so deplorably foolish a stare. "I never heard of such a thing," he said.

"What did you never hear of, sir?"

"I never heard of one niece and one uncle in a labourer's cottage wanting a bathroom apiece."

"Apparently you have never heard of very many things," retorted Fritzing angrily. "My niece desires to have her own bathroom, and it is no one's business but hers."

"She must be a queer sort of girl."

"Sir," cried Fritzing, "leave my niece out of the conversation."

"Oh all right—all right. I'm sure I don't want to talk about your niece. But as for the cottages, it's no good wanting those or any others, for you won't get 'em."

"And pray why not, if I offer a good price?"

"Lady Shuttleworth won't sell. Why should she? She'd only have to build more to replace them. Her people must live somewhere. And she'll never turn out old Shaw and the shoemaker to make room for a couple of strangers."

Fritzing was silent, for his heart was sinking. "Suppose, sir," he said after a pause, during which his eyes had been fixed thoughtfully on the carpet and Mr. Dawson had been staring at him and whistling softly but very offensively, "suppose I informed Lady Shuttleworth of my willingness to build two new cottages—excellent new cottages—for the tenants of these old ones, and pay her a good price as well for these, do you think she would listen to me?"

"I say, the schoolmastering business must be a rattling good one. I'm blessed if I know what you want to live in 'em for if money's so little object with you. They're shabby and uncomfortable, and an old chap like you—I mean, a man of your age, who's made his little pile, and wants luxuries like plenty of bathrooms—ought to buy something tight and snug. Good roof and electric light. Place for horse and trap. And settle down and be a gentleman."

"My niece," said Fritzing, brushing aside these suggestions with an angrily contemptuous wave of his hand, "has taken a fancy—I may say an exceedingly violent fancy—to these two cottages. What is all this talk of traps and horses? My niece wishes for these cottages. I shall do my utmost to secure them for her."

"Well, all I can say is she must be a—"

"Silence, sir!" cried Fritzing.

Mr. Dawson got up and opened the door very wide.

"Look here," he said, "there's no use going on talking. I've stood more from you than I've stood from any one for years. Take my advice and get back home and keep quiet for a bit. I've got no cottages, and Lady Shuttleworth would shut the door in your face when you got to the bathroom part. Where are you staying? At the Cock and Hens? Oh—ah—yes—at Baker's. Well, ask Mrs. Pearce to take great care of you. Tell her I said so. And good afternoon to you, Mr. Noyman. You see I've got the name right now—just as we're going to part."

"Before I go," said Fritzing, glaring down at Mr. Dawson, "let me tell you that I have seldom met an individual who unites in his manner so singularly offensive a combination of facetiousness and hectoring as yourself. I shall certainly describe your conduct to Lady Shuttleworth, and not, I hope, in unconvincing language. Sir, good afternoon."

"By-bye," said Mr. Dawson, grinning and waving a pleasant hand. Several bathrooms indeed! He need have no fears of Lady Shuttleworth. "Good luck to you with Lady S.!" he called after him cheerily. Then he went to his wife and bade her see to it that the servant never let Fritzing in again, explaining that he was not only a foreigner but a lunatic, and that the mixture was so bad that it hardly bore thinking of.

VI

While Fritzing was losing his temper in this manner at the agent's, Priscilla sat up in the churchyard in the sun. The Symford churchyard, its church, and the pair of coveted cottages, are on a little eminence rising like an island out of the valley. Sitting under the trees of this island Priscilla amused herself taking in the quiet scene at her feet and letting her thoughts wander down happy paths. The valley was already in shadow, but the tops of the hills on the west side of it were golden in the late afternoon sunshine. From the cottage chimneys smoke went up straight and blue into the soft sky, rooks came and settled over her head in the branches of the elms, and every now and then a yellow leaf would fall slowly at her feet. Priscilla's heart was filled with peace. She was going to be so good, she was going to lead such a clean and beautiful life, so quiet, so helpful to the poor, so hidden, so cleared of all confusions. Never again would she need to pose; never again be forced into conflict with her soul. She had chosen the better part; she had given up everything and followed after wisdom; and her life would be her justification. Who but knows the inward peace that descends upon him who makes good resolutions and abides with him till he suddenly discovers they have all been broken? And what does the breaking of them matter, since it is their making that is so wholesome, so bracing to the soul, bringing with it moments of such extreme blessedness that he misses much who gives it up for fear he will not keep them? Such blessed moments of lifting up of the heart were Priscilla's as she sat in the churchyard waiting, invisibly surrounded by the most beautiful resolutions it is possible to imagine. The Rev. Edward Morrison, the vicar of whom I have spoken as venerable, coming slowly up the path leaning on his son's arm with the intention of going into the church in search of a mislaid sermon-book, saw Priscilla's thoughtful back under the elm-tree and perceived at once that it was a back unknown to him. He knew all the Symford backs, and tourists hardly ever coming there, and never at that time of the year, it could not, he thought, be the back of a tourist. Nor could it belong to any one staying with the Shuttleworths, for he had been there that very afternoon and had found Lady Shuttleworth rejoicing over the brief period of solitude she and her son were enjoying before the stream of guests for the coming of age festivities began.

"Robin, what girl is that?" asked the vicar of his son.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Robin.

"She'll catch cold," said the vicar.

"I dare say," said Robin.

When they came out of the church ten minutes later Priscilla had not moved.

"She'll certainly catch cold," said the vicar, concerned.

"I should think it very likely," said Robin, locking the door.

"She's sitting on a stone."

"Yes, on old Dawson's slab."

"Unwise," said the vicar.

"Profane," said Robin.

The vicar took his boy's arm again—the boy, head and shoulders taller than his father, was down from Cambridge for the vacation then drawing to its close—and moved, I fear, by the same impulse of pure curiosity they walked together down the path that would take them right in front of the young woman on the slab.

Priscilla was lost in the bright dreams she was weaving, and looked up with the radiance of them still in her eyes at the two figures between her and the sunset.

"My dear young lady," said the vicar kindly, "are you not afraid of catching cold? The evenings are so damp now, and you have chosen a very cold seat."

"I don't feel cold," said Priscilla, smiling at this vision of benevolence.

"But I do think you ought not to linger here," said the vicar.

"I am waiting for my uncle. He's gone to buy a cottage, and ought to be back, really, by now."

"Buy a cottage?" repeated the vicar. "My dear young lady, you say that in the same voice you might use to tell me your uncle had gone to buy a bun."

"What is a bun?" asked Priscilla.

"A bun?" repeated the vicar bewildered, for nobody had ever asked him that before.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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