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THE SACRIFICE;

—OR—

FOR HER FAMILY'S SAKE.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The autumn had come round again, a dismal, rainy November. A bright fire was burning in the doctor's study, and he was sitting on the sofa, with a letter in his hand.

He was reading the two sheets for the twentieth time since they had been given to him the day before.

Frau von Tollen had come to see him; quiet and depressed she sat down beside him on the sofa, and asked about his health, and how he had borne the venture out after his illness, which had taken him to his old class the day before.

"Thanks," he replied. "I coughed a little more last night, and now the doctor insists upon my spending the winter in the south. It is very hard. I was glad to see my boys again! A feeling of new life came over me when I saw all their happy, smiling faces, and the joy expressed on their countenances at having their old tyrant back again, whom they had almost given up for lost. Afterward I went to the churchyard," he added in a low tone, and he laid his emaciated hand on that of the Frau Majorin.

"I have something to give you, dear doctor, that Katie left for you. I did not give it to you before, for I was afraid of agitating you, but now—" and she laid the letter that Katie had written the night she was taken ill down before him, and pressing his hand she got up quickly and left the room.

It gave him a strange feeling to see this crushed letter, which bore his name written in hurried characters. The slender little hand that had written it had long been mouldering in the dust. This last sign of her thought of him, like a message from another world, gave him a strange feeling of courage.

He had been thrown back in his recovery for weeks by the news of Katie's death, although it had been broken to him as carefully as possible. The announcement that that young, fresh life was snatched away had overwhelmed him.

Poor little Katie! He felt remorseful for every time he had shown her a grave face. She was such a child of sunshine, and she was so very fond of him.

Almost reverently he opened her letter, but for a moment his heart beat so fast that he was unable to read it. It seemed almost like a voice from the grave. At length he forced himself to read.

"Dear Ernest:

"I scarcely know how to begin to tell you all I have to say in this letter.

"In the first place I must beg your forgiveness for all the wrong I have done to you that you know of, and for all that you do not know of, which is the worst and greatest. Dear Ernest, it is very hard to confess this to you, but I know you will console yourself, for you do not love me; you love Lora. Don't shake your head, Ernest, I know it as well as you do. You have never forgotten Lora, any more than she has forgotten you, and so I did not give you Lora's messages. I tore up the letter she entrusted to me for you, and I made you think ill of her, and when she absolutely refused to marry Becher, I urged her to do it, and told her that her duty to her family ought to come before her own inclinations. And when she had sacrificed herself she wanted me to ask you to forgive her, and I would not do it. I don't know why I write this, I did not mean to; but I cannot help it—it seems as if someone were standing behind me and saying, 'Confess, confess, before it is too late!'

"Forgive me, too, for breaking my engagement with you now. I have known since yesterday that what I felt for you was not love, but caprice, jealousy, perverseness. I wanted you to belong to me, and I succeeded in my endeavor. I love Hans Wegstedt; and yesterday, at the riding lesson, I gave him my promise, which I had no right to give. So now I take it back from you, dear Ernest, and beg you to forgive me if I have given you pain. I do not love you, really—not at all—I only love you as a girl is fond of her teacher. I confess frankly that I can only be happy in such a position in life as Hans has to offer me, and I should be perfectly miserable as a poor man's wife.

"I know I am very wicked and I should like to be better. When I am Hans Wegstedt's wife, I will be kind to the poor and do all the good I can. Only forgive me, Ernest, and do not despise me. If you scorn me I shall never be happy again, not even as Hans's wife. I cannot help loving Hans. If only Lora might be happy again, Ernest! Ask your mother to forgive me, and do you forgive me, too, Ernest, and keep one kind thought for your

"KATIE VON TOLLEN."

He dropped the letter and hid his face in his hands.

And this child, this light, frivolous, foolish girl, without one serious thought, had been the cause of all this frightful

misery. He threw the letter on the table and clenched his fist in his wrath and his grief. He sat thus for a long time until the twilight gradually stole over the quiet room. It seemed to him all at once as if she were sitting beside him in all her sweet freshness and loveliness. The breath of violets, which came to him from her letter, made the illusion perfect. He could hear the rustling of her dress beside him, he seemed to see her magnificent eyes, which had smilingly betrayed him, and to hear the sweet, caressing voice saying: "You do not love me, Ernest, you love Lora; you could not forget her any more than she could forget you."

What a riddle is a man's heart! The wrath that had seized upon him against the dead, when he had read her letter, melted at these words. A great tear rolled down his cheek, beneath the hand that covered his eyes, and fell on his beard.

"You shall be forgiven for the sake of these words," he murmured to himself. And he took up the letter and read it again and again.

This explained Wegstedt's anger. Poor fellow! Who had ever looked into those eyes without suffering for it?

Wegstedt did not come back to Wegtenberg again—only once, when Katie was buried, and at that time he had been here at the Schonbergs, and had demanded to see the doctor. But the mother had refused this in her grief, and, moreover, the doctor was very ill then, and could not have understood anything. Then Wegstedt had spent some time at his father's estate; then the doctor had seen in the paper that he had exchanged into an East Prussian garrison—far away from the place where his youthful love had had so tragic an ending. But first he had undergone his punishment for his share in the duel—imprisonment in the fortress at Magdeburg.

The doctor had this still to look forward to when his health was restored. His mother came up and asked if she disturbed him.

"No, no, mother." His voice sounded clearer and fresher than it had done for a long time.

"Your trunk has come, and the burgomaster has sent you a passport, Ernest; so now you can go any day you like. You have only to decide when."

"It is hard to go, mother."

"Yes, but you must do all you can to get your health back again. I think myself it takes some resolution to undertake a journey to the Mediterranean; they tell such tales about it, I shall be glad when you get safe home again, Ernest."

"Ah, I am not afraid of the south," he said smiling. "I have always wanted to go there, but now I feel as if the only good thing in life was to be well in body and mind."

"Oh, yes; it is all very well to wander in foreign lands, but not to be ill there."

"And how will you get on all alone here, mother?"

"? Eh, I am no better than other people; the poor Frau Majorin is all alone. But I was going to tell you—Helen is married at last to her long-suffering betrothed. I sat in our pew and saw the ceremony. There wasn't a soul in the church except the young couple, the mother, the old uncle, who is an excellency, and Lora."

He started and his mother's story drowned on in his ears; how sorrowful the black-robed company looked before the altar, though to be sure the poor things had suffered enough, and ought not to wait another whole year in addition to their long engagement. "Yes, and as I was going to say, after the ceremony I congratulated the newly-married couple and the majorin, too, only very quickly, for we have seen a great deal of each other in all this trouble—and then my eyes fell on Lora, and," she continued with a deep sigh, "and I must say, Ernest, she is still beautiful, perhaps even more beautiful than she was before, and she looks as if she had grown, she seemed so tall and slender beside the old general—but—"

"Well?"

"Well, I felt anxious about her—her face looks as if it were cut out of marble, with great blue rings under the eyes; if I were the majorin I should be afraid she was going to be ill."

"Is she going to stay here, mother?"

"No, the majorin said the old general would not let her go, and had gone and insisted on her leaving the hospital. He declared he was ill himself and needed a nurse, and the family ought to come first. She will stay all winter with him, the majorin told me. They have already gone back to Berlin. Fraulein Melitta is going to stay with her sister-in-law for the present. We have entered into a compact that I am to go to her sometimes and she is to come to me sometimes. The winter will pass somehow."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

The general had engaged the same little apartment near Trajan's Forum. In spite of his rheumatism the old gentleman had remained longer in Berlin