

to the farthest star, what the bird of Paradise is to a sparrow."

"You see—"
"That is, outwardly," Fritz went on. "She has the texture and translucence of a bit of Dresden china, the patina of an old-world faience. She has the mouth of a priestess of sacred love, the eyes of a stellar spirit come to earth. I thought I had seen beauty before, but I know now that I was mistaken. Outwardly she is—"

"Quite so," interrupted Saunders. "Outwardly she is flesh and blood in comely mould. Mentally, I suppose, she is less endowed."

"Oh, her intellect's all right," said Fritz. "But she is a woman—a snare in one's path, a cat seeking a home, a seller of alluring goods to the longest purse."

Cynicism is the prerogative of modern youth, my dear Fritz. Practice it while it lasts, for eight-and-twenty will find you a sentimentalist for a certainty. You are too good a person not to mellow with years of discretion, and when the true sun rises the cynic's cloak will be cast aside into the rubbish-heap of discarded crudities."

Fritz gulped down his liqueur. "You are a fine fellow, Saunders," he cried; "the finest in the world. If all men were like you, all women would be like Mrs. Saunders. But you don't see my point? If this little Western bird of Paradise is as angelic in soul as in body; if, as you put it, the true sun rises—what then? I am done for. A man in love is of no use in war, or Grimland politics. I need all my thoughts, all my energies, for sterner things than an amorous entanglement. On no possible account must I fall in love at the present juncture."

"If love takes you that way, by all means avoid it. If, on the other hand, it is likely to be a stimulus to high actions, self-sacrifice, and unselfishness—well, do not avoid it."

"I am avoiding it at all costs," maintained Fritz stubbornly. "I must not fall in love with Miss Perowne, and she must not fall in love with me."

"Why not the latter contingency?" "Why not!" repeated Fritz. "Do you suppose I could refuse those eyes if they pleaded with me. Himmel! I have compared her to a piece of Dresden china and a bird of Paradise. Those two things suggest but two aspects of her being—daintiness and perfect colouring. She has a thousand others for which I have no simile. To put it prosaically, I am diabolically conscious of her overwhelming charms. I am a man, a weak man, and if she lay siege to my bachelorhood I should resist in vain. I hate cats, but when they rub purring round my legs, something softens within me, and I scratch the back of their necks and give them cream."

SAUNDERS smiled his superior, patronizing smile. "And you seriously think this wonderfully beautiful young woman is going to employ her wiles on you?" he asked.

Fritz hesitated. Then he shook his head sullenly. "No," he said, "I do not think it is likely."

"Why not? After all, others have done so. Higher born and lovelier creatures, even—"

"Thanks," interrupted Fritz; "we can leave the past alone. I do not think that under existing circumstances Miss Perowne will make love to me."

"What are the existing circumstances?" Saunders asked.

"She does not know who I am. When I was insulted by Major Lachenberg in the Concordia yesterday, I was about to give Mrs. Perowne my card. After that incident—although I swear it was the bravest thing I have ever done—I was not so proud of my name. I said I had not my card-case with me. I lied, and, appropriately enough, I gave my name as Mr. Liar—Herr Lugner."

"And you think Miss Perowne would not be anxious to become Frau Lugner?"

"I appeared to her as a coward. I have since stated that I am a nobody without ambition. Why should she set her cap at an insignificant craven? But if she knew that I was a

Baron of Grimland, Fritz of Friedrichsheim, with ten thousand acres of vineyards, twenty thousand acres of pine-forest, and a Schloss on the Traumberg as big as the Guards' barracks—why, she might play the wheedling game dangerously well."

"Fritz, Fritz," laughed Saunders, "you are that rare being, a genuine cynic. Most of us give off a certain amount of cynicism at odd intervals. It is an easy form of wit, and covers a vast amount of soft-heartedness. But you are the real thing. You honestly believe, as you put it, that women are cats looking for the best home. I cannot disillusionize you. Time may, or an English girl."

"I do not propose to give her the chance. I avoid her at all costs."

"And I am determined to make her acquaintance," said Saunders. "We always try and show a certain amount of hospitality to English people here, and my wife, who, by the way, is lurching with some Americans, is going to call on the Perownes this afternoon."

"Ask her to dinner," said Fritz, "but don't ask me the same evening."

"As you will," said Saunders. "Touching a more important matter," said Fritz, "the Rathsherren meet at five o'clock, I believe."

"At five in the old Council Chamber of the Strafeburg," Saunders affirmed. "We have plenty of time before us. We might have a game or two of piquet till about four o'clock."

"You forget that I have sworn off cards."

"We need not play for money. That would be conforming to the spirit of your oath."

"Piquet without money! That is like talking to a beautiful English girl without making love to her."

"There is a certain resemblance," admitted Saunders. "It is a good training for one's mental palate to indulge in tasteless diversion."

Fritz consented, and the men played their harmless game till four o'clock. Then they put on their fur coats and ventured into the streets. The sun had set, and with its setting an ice-cold breeze had sprung up and made of the city a place of sad and abominable draughts. Crossing the Karlstrasse, they plunged into a narrow alley, through which a funnel of damp air rushed with nipping virulence. Here they were in the quarter of the Morast, a district of great age and little respectability. Here were the dilapidated tenements of the poor, the gloomy wine-and-beer shops of the seedy reveller. Story projected on story on either side of the confined thoroughfare, till the high-pitched gables almost met overhead, like drunken men greeting one another in a lurching embrace of sodden fraternity. The two men knew their Weidenbruck well, and threaded their way through the labyrinth of slums without difficulty or hesitation. Presently they entered an especially narrow lane—the Schugasse—a way of infamous taverns and low gaming houses, a street of thick-heaped snow and evil odours. They came to a high blank wall, broken at the far end by a big square house with a yellow light over the door.

"That's Neumann's," said Fritz, pointing to the house in question. The Mayor of Weidenbruck's private abode was adjacent to his bottling works, and the house in which he dwelt antedated by perhaps a century the present sinister reputation of the Morast.

Just as Fritz spoke the door opened and the closely wrapped form of a woman emerged into the street. The two men held on their way, but as they drew near the veiled figure Saunders felt Fritz's fingers tighten on his forearm. As they were passing the woman she seemed to gaze intently at them through her blue veil; she even half stopped in her progress, but for a moment only, and then uttering a sigh, she walked rapidly past them.

"'Tis she," whispered Fritz; "Charlotte the wanton."

"The ex-Queen?" said Saunders. "I thought I recognized the figure and the walk. What has she been visiting Neumann for?"

(To be continued.)

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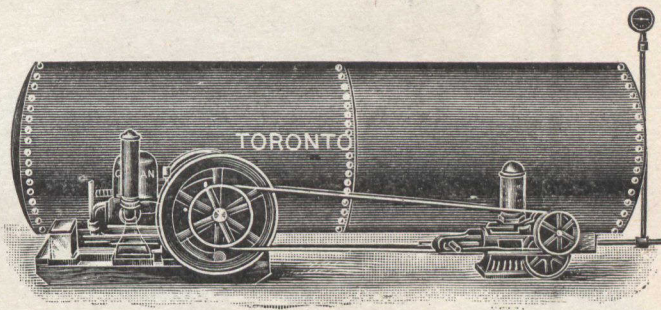
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