

links were fast wearing out. Presently Paul rose up in his wrath, which was as still and white as Irma's was flushed and violent.

"You are making my life so very disagreeable," he said, "that if we were any more closely connected I don't think that I could endure it. All this brutal bullying of yours has made me hate you. I curse the day when you first tempted me to be a scoundrel and put myself in your power."

"I tempt you!" she said, with a grating laugh. "What a mistake! It was you, Mr. Lorrimer, who had your little plans ready, and I who gave you courage to carry them out. You are not a very clever scoundrel."

"Perhaps not," he said, looking at her with a sort of loathing. "At all events, not clever enough to be your husband."

"Ah," she said, "that is my affair. If you suit me——"

She came a little nearer, and laid her hand on his arm. He shook her off.

"But I do not," he said firmly. "It is altogether a mistake. For heaven's sake, Irma, let me go. I do not love you any more."

"I see that," she said, with a sort of fierce self-control. "I am neither deaf nor blind, and you do not take pains to deceive me."

"And I do love," he went on, as though she had not spoken "some one else."

"I know that, too," said Irma.

She was quiet now, and looked worn out with the struggle.

"Listen," said Paul, sitting down, and motioning her to a seat beside him. "I have something to propose."

"Not marriage?" asked Irma, satirically.

"No; that is out of the question."

"Yet it is not every American who can marry a countess," suggested Irma.

"No," assented Paul; "It is not every American who wants to."

Irma actually smiled, but coldly. Her fury had subsided.

"What I wish to propose is this: I will give you the money which I got for that accursed deed——"

"You said that you got none."

"I lied," said Paul, with the air of a man who is tired of explaining.

The countess threw up her hands, with a brief ejaculation in her mother-tongue. Then she turned to Lorrimer with a strange mixture of mockery and surprise in her face.

"Is it that you die to-night, my friend, that we have these strange truths?"

"I don't know," said Paul, with a sort of dull weariness. "Perhaps. I don't care."

"Go on," said the countess. "My amiable mother will be here soon. Make haste."

"As you care so much for money, you may have it—if you will keep quiet."

He turned his dark eyes upon her, and looked straight into her own. Irma moved uneasily, but her gaze did not falter.

"That, you know," she said with a little flippant laugh, "I can never do. It is not my nature."

"Very well," said Paul. "I know as much about you as you do of me, —rather more. It will be a scandalous nut for Berlin society to crack."

"The Berliners are not so simple as you believe," she said. "They would not listen. Now give me the rest of your charming programme."

"What a wonderful woman you are!" he exclaimed, in spite of himself.

"And yet you do not marry me."

"No; you are too wonderful."

"Well, what is the plan?"

"The rest of it is, . . . I am going to ask Mrs. Thorndyke to be my wife."

"Ah!" said Irma, with a sort of passing shudder; "you will, will you?"

"That is my intention," said Paul, with decision.

"No wonder you can afford to give me a little money. Will she accept you, do you think?"

"Probably not; but I mean to ask her."

"You are kind to prepare me so gently. You are not such a brute, after all."

She said this with a kind of deadly pleasantry, which was enough to freeze a timid man's blood. But Paul was not timid.

"I hope," said he, politely, "that I shall become less and less brutal under the influence of——" But the name stuck in his throat.

"I suppose that you will see her to-night," said Irma, also politely. Then, as the old countess's step was heard at the door, she added, "Tell her that I will call on her early to-morrow morning."

And, as the Gräfin entered, Lorrimer left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

After a dinner eaten quite alone and embittered at each mouthful by his own reflections, Paul carried out his plan of calling on Mrs. Thorndyke. It would be unnecessary to describe his thoughts as he drove to the Hohen-zollern-Strasse. By the time he reached the house, he felt thoroughly unhinged and ready to do anything reckless and foolish. He was shown into the *salon*, where the servant told him that he would find Mrs. Thorndyke alone. The room was not brilliantly lighted, yet he paused on the threshold with a look of dazzling bewilderment, for standing beside the fireplace, with her arm resting on the mantel-piece, was the most lovely woman he had ever seen. It certainly was Jessica,—but Jessica transformed, sublimated, glorified into something more exquisite than she had ever been before.

(To be Continued.)

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