
Elfa

"I could better have borne with a more cruel one, sweetheart," I answered, truly enough. "Although I could not better have realised how great my fault has been."

She was silent a moment at this.

"You do not ask me about my confession?"

"No, child; I do not wish to know a word that you do not quite freely wish to tell me."

"But I do wish to tell you. I wish it very earnestly; but I scarce know how to begin," she said, her brows puckered in wistful hesitation.

"Then do not begin at all. Let us take the confession as if it had been all said; and let this be the kiss of absolution," I whispered, kissing her.

"Yes, I will have the absolution beforehand," she replied with a half-mischievous glance. "I'll make sure of that; for you may not be so ready with the pardon when you know the offence. What would you say if I had deceived you, Ernst; and had kept a great secret from you?" A look of mock gravity settled her features, but could not hide the roguish light that now danced in her eyes.

"I should say you had deceived yourself in thinking so; and that it must be some excellent reason which kept a secret hidden in your little woman's head."

"But what if it were a secret about a handsome, gallant officer; like Captain von Unger, say; and that he and I had planned to come here to Aschern, all without your knowledge? What then?"

I did not let a muscle start, nor a nerve twitch.