

The Story.

Queen Tita's Wager.

CHAPTER I.

FRANZISKA FAHLER.

It is Christmas morning in Surrey—cold, still and gray, with a frail glimmer of sunshine coming through the bare trees to melt the hoar-frost on the lawn. The postman had just gone out, swinging the gate behind him. A fire burns brightly in the breakfast room; and there is silence about the house, for the children have gone off to climb Box-hill before being marched to church.

The small and gentle lady who presides over the household, walks sedately in, and lifts the solitary letter that is lying on her plate. About three seconds suffice to let her run through its contents, and then she suddenly cries:

"I knew it! I said it! I told you two months ago she was only flirting with him; and now she has rejected him. And, oh! I am so glad of it. The poor boy!"

The other person in the room, who has been meekly waiting for his breakfast for half an hour, ventures to point out that there is nothing to rejoice over in the fact of a young man having been rejected by a young woman.

"If it were final, yes! If those two young folks were not certain to go and marry somebody else, you might congratulate them both. But you know they will. The poor boy will go courting again in three months' time, and be vastly pleased with his condition."

"Oh, never, never!" she says; "he has had such a lesson. You know I warned him. I knew she was only flirting with him. Poor Charlie! Now I hope he will get on with his profession, and leave such things out of his head. And as for that creature—"

"I will do you the justice to say," observed her husband, who is still regarding the table with a longing eye, "that you did oppose this match, because you hadn't the making of it. If you had brought these two together they would have been married ere this. Never mind; you can marry him to somebody of your own choosing now."

"No," she says, with much decision, he must not think of marriage. He can not think of it. It will take the poor lad a long time to get over this blow."

"He will marry within a year."

"I will bet you whatever you like that he doesn't," she says, triumphantly.

"Whatever I like? That is a big wager. If you lose, do you think you could pay? I should like, for example, to have my own way in my own house."

"If I lose you shall," said the generous creature; and the bargain is concluded.

Nothing further is said about this matter for the moment. The children return from Box-hill, and are rigged out for church. Two young people, friends of ours, and recently married, having no domestic circle of their own, and having promised to spend the whole Christmas-day with us, arrive.

Then we set out, trying as much as possible to think that Christmas-day is different from any other day, and pleased to observe that the younger folks, at least, cherish the delusion.

But just before we reach the church I say to the small lady who got the letter in the morning, and whom we generally call Tita,

"When do you expect to see Charlie?"

"I don't know," she answers. After this cruel affair he won't like to go about much."

"You remember that he promised to go with us to the Black Forest?"

"Yes; and I am sure it will be a pleasant trip for him."

"Shall we go to Huferschingen?"

"I suppose so."

"Franziska is a pretty girl."

Now, you would not think that any great mischief could be done by the mere remark that Franziska was a pretty girl. Anybody who had seen Franziska Fahler, niece of the proprietor of the "Golden Book," in Huferschingen, would admit that in a moment. But this is, nevertheless, true, that our important but diminutive Queen Tita was very thoughtful during the rest of our walk to this little church; and in church, too, she was thinking so deeply that she almost forgot to look at the effect of the decorations she had nailed up the day before. Yet nothing could have offended her in the bare observation that Franziska was a pretty girl.

At dinner, in the evening, we had our two guests and a few young fellows from London who did not happen to have their families or homes there. Curiously enough, there was a vast deal of talk about travelling, and also about Baden, and more particularly about the southern districts of Baden. Tita said the Black Forest was the most charming place in the world; and as it was Christmas-day, and as we have been listening to a sermon all about charity, and kindness, and consideration for others, nobody was rude enough to contradict her. But our forbearance was put to a severe test, when, after dinner, she produced a photographic album and handed it round, and challenged everybody to say whether the young lady in the corner was not absolutely lovely. Most of them said that she was certainly very nice looking; and Tita seemed a little disappointed.

I perceived that it would no longer do to say that Franziska was a pretty girl. We should henceforth have to swear by everything we held dear that she was absolutely lovely.

CHAPTER II.

ZEN "GOLDEN BOOK."

We felt some pity for the lad when we took him aboard with us; but it must be confessed that at first he was not a very desirable travelling companion. There was a gloom about him. Despite the eight months that had elapsed, he professed that his old wound was still open. Tita treated him with the kindest maternal solicitude, which was a great mistake; tonics, not sweets, are required in such cases. Yet he was very grateful; and he said, with a blush, that, in any case, he would not rail against all women because of the badness of one. Indeed, you would not have fancied he had any great grudge against woman-kind. There were a great many English abroad that

autumn, and we met whole batches of pretty girls at every station and every table d'hôte on our route. Did he avoid them, or glare at them savagely, or say hard things of them? Oh, no!—quite the reverse. He was a little shy at first; and when he saw a party of distressed damsels in a station, with their bewildered father in vain attempting to make himself understood to a porter, he would assist them in a brief and business-like manner, as if it were a duty, lift his cap, and then march off relieved. But by-and-by he began to make acquaintances in the hotels; and, as he was a handsome, English-looking lad, who bore a certificate of honesty in his clear gray eyes and easy gait, he was rather made much of. Nor could any fault be decently found with his appetite.

So we passed on from Königswinter to Coblenz, and from Coblenz to Heidelberg, and from Heidelberg south to Freiburg, where we bade adieu to the last of the towns, and laid hold of a trap with a pair of ancient and angular horses, and plunged into the Holfenthal, the first great gorge of the Black Forest mountains. From one point to another we slowly urged our devious course, walking most of the day, indeed, and putting the trap and ourselves up for the night at some quaint roadside hostelry, where we ate of roe-deer, and drank of Affenthaler, and endeavored to speak German with a pure Waldshut accent. And then, one evening, when there was a clear green-and-gold sky overhead, and when the last rays of the sun were shining along the hills and touching the stems of the tall pines, we drove into a narrow valley, and caught sight of a large brown building of wood, with projecting eaves and quaint windows, that stood close by the forest.

"Here is my dear inn!" cried Tita, with a great glow of delight and affection in her face. "Here is *mein gutes Thal!* Ich grüß dich ein tausend Mal! And here is old Peter come out to see us; and there is Franziska!"

"Oh! this is Franziska, is it?" said Charlie.

Yes, this was Franziska. She was a well-built, handsome girl of nineteen or twenty, with a healthy, sun-burned complexion, and dark hair plaited into two long tails, which were taken up and twisted into a knot behind. That you could see from a distance. But on nearer approach you found that Franziska had really fine and intelligent features, and a pair of frank, clear, big brown eyes that had a very straight look about them. They were something of the eyes of a deer, indeed; wide apart, soft, and apprehensive, yet looking with a certain directness and unconsciousness that overcame her natural girlish timidity. Tita simply flew at her and kissed her heartily, and asked her twenty questions at once. Franziska answered in very fair English, a little slow and formal, but quite grammatical. Then she was introduced to Charlie, and she shook hands with him in a simple and unembarrassed way, and then she turned to one of the servants and gave some directions about the luggage. Finally, she begged Tita to go indoors and get off her travelling attire, which was done, leaving us two outside.

"She's a very pretty girl," Charlie said carelessly. "I suppose she's sort of head-cook or kitchen-maid here."

"The impudence of these young men is something extraordinary,"

"If you wish to have your head in your hands," I remarked to him, "just you repeat that remark at dinner. Why, Franziska is no end of a swell. She has two thousand pounds and the half of a mill. She has a sister married to the Geheim-Ober-Hofbaurath of Hesse-Cassel. She has visited both Paris and Munich; and she has her dresses made in Freiburg."

"But why does such an illustrious creature bury herself in this valley, and in an old inn, and go about bareheaded?"

"Because there are some folks in the world without ambition, who like to live a quiet, decent, homely life. Every girl can't marry a Geheim-Ober-Hofbaurath. Ziska, now, is much more likely to marry the young doctor here."

"Oh, indeed! and live here all her days. She couldn't do better. Happy Franziska!"

We went indoors. It was a low, large, rambling place, with one immense room, all the round with roe-deer's horns, and with one lesser room fitted up with a billiard-table. The inn lay a couple of hundred yards back from Huferschingen, but it had been made the headquarters of the keepers, and just outside this room were a number of pegs for them to sling their guns and bags on when they came in of an evening. We had a large and a schoppen of white wine. Ziska's uncle and aunt were both large, stout and somnolent people, very good natured and kind, but a trifle dull. Ziska really had the management of the place, and she was not slow to lend a hand if the servants were remiss in waiting on us. But that, it was understood, was done out of compliment to our small Queen Tita.

By-and-by we sat down to dinner, and Franziska came to see that everything was going on straight. It was a dinner "with scenery." You forgot to be particular about the soup, the venison and the Affenthaler when, from the window at your elbow you could look across the narrow valley and behold a long stretch of the Black Forest shining in the red glow of the sunset. The lower the sun sank the more intense became the crimson light on the tall stems of the pines; and then you could see the line of shadow slowly rising up the side of the opposite hill until only the topmost trees were touched with the fire. Then these, too, lost it, and all the forest around us fell and the twilight faded out of the sky overhead. Presently the long undulations of fir grew black, the stars came out, and the sound of the stream could be heard distantly in the hollow; and then, at Tita's wish, we went off for a last stroll in among the soft moss and under the darkness of the pines, now and again startling some great capercaillie and sending it flying and whirling down the glades.

When we returned from that prow into the forest we found the inn dark. Such people as may have called in had gone home; but we suspected that Franziska had given the neighbors a hint not to overwhelm us on our first arrival. When we entered the big room, Franziska came in with candles; then she brought some matches, and also put on the table an odd little pack of cards, and went out. Her uncle and aunt had, even before we went out, come and bade us good night formally and shaken hands all round. They are early folk in the Black Forest.

"Where has that girl gone now?" says Charlie. "Into that lonely billiard-room. Couldn't you ask her to come in here? Or shall we go and play billiards?"

Tita stares, and then demurely smiles; but it is with an assumed severity that she rebukes him for such a wicked proposal, and reminds him that he must start early next morning. He grows assent. Then she takes her leave.

The big young man sits silent for a moment or two, with his hands in his pockets and his legs stretched out. I begin to think I am in for it—the old story of blighted hopes, and angry denunciation, and hypocritical joy, and all the rest of it. But suddenly Charlie looks up with a business-like air, and says:—

"Who is that doctor fellow you were speaking about? Shall we see him to-morrow?"

"You saw him to-night. It was he who passed us on the road with the two beagles."

"What, that little fellow with the bandy legs and the spectacles?" he cries, with a great laugh.

"That little fellow," I observe to him, "is a man of some importance, I can tell you. He—"

"I suppose his sister married a Geheim-Oberbaurath—what the dickens is it?" says this disrespectful young man.

"Dr. Krumm has got the Iron Cross."

"That won't make his legs any the straighter."

"He was at Weissenburg."

"I suppose he got that cast in the eye there."

"He can play the zither in a way that would astonish you. He has got a little money. Franziska and he would be able to live very comfortably together."

"Franziska and that fellow?" says Charlie; and then he rises with a sulky air, and proposes we should take our candles with us.

But he is not sulky very long; for Ziska, hearing our footsteps, comes to the passage and bids us a friendly good-night.

"Good-night, Miss Fahler!" he says, in rather a shamefaced way; "and I am so awfully sorry we have kept you up so late. We shan't do it again."

You would have thought by his manner that it was two o'clock; whereas it was only half-past eleven!

CHAPTER III.

DR. KRUMM.

There was no particular reason why Dr. Krumm should marry Franziska Fahler, except that he was the most important young man in Huferschingen, and she was the most important young woman. People, therefore, thought they would make a good match; although Franziska certainly had the most to give in the way of good looks. Dr. Krumm was a short, bandy-legged, sturdy young man, with long, fair hair, a tanned complexion, light blue eyes, not quite looking the same way, spectacles, and a general air of industrious common sense about him, if one may use such a phrase. There was certainly little of the lover in his manner toward Ziska, and as little in hers toward him. They were very good friends, though, and he called her Ziska, while she gave him his nickname of Fidele, his real name being Fidele.

Now on this, the first morning of our stay in Huferschingen, all the population had turned out at an early hour to see us start for the forest, and as the Ober-Forster had gone away to visit his parents in Bavaria, Dr. Krumm was appointed to superintend the operations of the day. And when everybody was busy renewing acquaintance with us, gathering in the straying dogs, examining guns and cartridge-belts, and generally aiding in the profound commotion of our setting out, Dr. Krumm was found to be talking in a very friendly and familiar manner with our pretty Franziska. Charlie eyed them with askance. He began to say very disrespectful things of Krumm. He thought Krumm a plain person. And then, when the bandy-legged doctor had got all the dogs, keepers and beaters together, we set off along the road, and presently plunged into the cool shade of the forest, where the thick moss suddenly silenced our footsteps, and where there was a moist and resinous smell in the air.

Well, the incidents of the forenoon's shooting, picturesque as they were, and full of novelty to Tita's people, need not be described. At the end of the fourth drive, when we had got on nearly to luncheon-time, it appeared that Charlie had killed a handsome buck, and he was so pleased with this performance, that he grew friendly with Dr. Krumm, who had, indeed, given him the *hauptschelte*. But when, as we sat down to our sausages and bread and red wine, Charlie incidentally informed our commander-in-chief that, during one of the drives, a splendid yellow fox had come out of the under-wood and stood and stared at him for three or four seconds, the doctor uttered a cry of despair.

"I should have told you that," he said in English that was not quite so good as Ziska's. "If I had remembered, yes! The English will not shoot the foxes; but they are very bad for us, they kill the young deer; we are glad to shoot them; and Franziska, she told me she wanted a yellow fox for the skin, to make something."

Charlie got very red in the face. He had missed a chance. If he had known that Franziska wanted a yellow fox, all the instinctive veneration for that animal that was in him would have gone clean out, and the fate of the animal—for Charlie was a smart shot—would have been definitely sealed.

"Are there many of them?" said he, gloomily.

"No; not many. But where there is one there are generally four or five. In the next drive we may come on them, yes! I will put you in a good place, sir; and you must not think of letting him go away, for Franziska, who has waited two, three weeks, did not want a yellow fox not anywhere, and it is for the variety of a skin in a—a—I don't know what you call it."

"A rug, I suppose," said Charlie.

I subsequently heard that Charlie went to his post with a fixed determination to shoot anything of yellow color that came near him. His station was next to that of Dr. Krumm; but, of course, they were invisible to each other. The horns of the beaters sounded a warning; in the perfect silence each one guns and stood on the alert; in the perfect silence each one waited for the first glimmer of a brown hide down the long glades of young fir. Then, according to Charlie's account, by a vent two or three deer like lightning—all of them does. A buck came last, but swerved just as he came in sight, and back came last, but swerved for the line of beaters. Two more does, and then an absolute blank. One or two shots had been heard in a distance; other some of the more distant stations had been more fortunate, or one or other of the beaters had tried his luck.

(To be Continued.)